

An Aperture of Educational Values

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Introduction

Thomas Sergiovanni has made a life's work of writing about the importance of community in schooling. One of his books is titled *Building Community in Schools* (1999) and the subtitles to some of his other books include *Creating Culture, Community and Personal Meaning in Our Schools* (2004) and *Leading and Learning Together in Schools* (2005). The question is *why?* Not *why is community important*, for its importance is self-evident. No, the question is *why would a highly respected professor and a major publisher (Jossey-Bass) invest so much time and so many resources into something so obvious?* Saying that community in schooling is important is like saying that breathing is important. Schooling, by definition, is a collective enterprise. It isn't just important for schooling to have community; schooling *is* community. It can't *not* be community. Or can it?

When we get community right, we learn how to turn visions into collective commitments and collective commitments into actions that make the school a better place for teachers and students alike. (Sergiovanni 2005, 74)

The fact that we can get school community so wrong that books need to be written to tell us how to get it right is troubling to say the least. Consider these statements from Sergiovanni's *Strengthening the Heartbeat* (2005):

It is principals, teachers, parents and students together who will make the difference in the struggle for building quality schools. (9)

Communities of practice are formed as teachers come together in a common effort to help each other teach and learn, to care for each other, and to work together in advancing student academic achievement. (48)

Supportive work cultures and facilitative work structures...result in higher levels of student engagement and improvements in student learning. (70)

Just as it is important that teachers try their best, so it is important that students, too, try their best. (72)

...the secret to change is to make sure that everyone has the support and the capacity they need to implement the change successfully. (94)

Are our schools truly so dysfunctional that we need to be let in on the “secret” that support is a good thing? Did the Jossey-Bass editors and Harvard reviewers (cf. back of dust jacket) not find these observations utterly facile? Sergiovanni concludes his book, without blinking an eye, “Schools get smarter when individual intelligences are aggregated” (2005, 177).

None of this, of course, is Sergiovanni’s or Jossey-Bass’s fault. They are simply responding to a perceived need in modern American education. So how did we get ourselves into this predicament? Has individualism or, worse, social Darwinism taken over our schools? Are each school’s teachers, students, administrators, and parents merely a collection of randomly placed individuals and not an organic, nurturing community? Obviously, each individual school will be found somewhere between those two extremes, and each school is different from the next. But the fact remains: Sergiovanni’s well-received books are addressing a breakdown in community.

The New York Times journalist David Brooks summarizes three studies in his article, “What Our Words Tell Us,” that point to the dangers of rising individualism:

Over the past half-century, society has become more individualistic. As it has become more individualistic, it has also become less morally aware, because social and moral fabrics are inextricably linked. The atomization and demoralization of society have led to certain forms of social breakdown, which government has tried to address, sometimes successfully and often impotently. (Brooks 2013)

The three studies mirrored in the three main points of this quote—individualism, demoralization, and governmentalization—are, in fact, three of the predominant issues dealt with in the recent books of educationalists Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, Thomas Sergiovanni, and Theodore Sizer. These three issues are far from the only ones that could be explored, and, the way Brooks tells it, they are closely interwoven, as indeed are all aspects of our interconnected world. Nonetheless, approaching them singly allows us to tease out elements that might otherwise be lost in the mix, as long as we remain wary of oversimplification. And, frankly, the challenges of contemporary education are legion. These three are as good a place as any to start.

Individualism

We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—
we find it with another.
~Thomas Merton

Sergiovanni, in the series of quotes above, says that school improvement requires everyone “together” in a “common effort” doing “supportive work,” “try[ing] their best,” to “implement the change successfully.” The reverse image, the negative, would imply that the people involved in education today are not working together, not supporting one another, and not doing their best to make schools a better place.

How is that possible? Teachers, for the most part, are known to be some of the most caring and self-sacrificing people in any profession. So what is Sergiovanni after?

A couple of analogues may shed some light on the situation. First, anyone who has participated on a track team at school will probably remember being surprised by the coach saying something to the effect, “And now I will teach you how to run.” How to run? Everyone knows how to run! We’ve been doing it since shortly after we learned how to walk. Or, alternately, anyone who has attended a class on meditation will be similarly shocked by the teacher saying, “Now I will teach you how to breathe.” In my experience, it is the same with teaching itself. By and large, people who are drawn to the teaching profession—people who “like teaching” and “like kids”—are assumed to already know (“naturally”) how to teach, i.e., how to communicate the subject matter of their choice to their pupils. But those are a lot of assumptions: (1) that “liking teaching” might not mean “liking talking” (too much?), (2) that “liking kids” might not mean “needing the affirmation of (small) humans,” (3) that teaching is a natural gift and not (also) an art to be practiced and mastered, (4) that communication is primarily verbal and one-way (from teacher to student), (5) that subject matter is something like food, a fixed quantity to be fed to the (supposedly) hungry, (6) that teachers get to choose their subject matter, implying some sense of enthusiasm for it, and (7) that pupils aren’t also teachers (and vice versa).

In reality, the average classroom teacher rarely, if ever, considers *how* to teach. She may give great thought to *what* to teach or even *how* to discipline the unruly ones, but different teacher personalities—more or less well-suited to working with

young people—are largely just chalked up to different teaching “styles,” an inordinate number of which could be lumped together as a mere *transmission* style, i.e. the teacher transmits knowledge/information to the student. Without the time and opportunity for teachers to learn from/with one another (Hargreaves 2003, 104f., 114)—e.g., senior teachers mentoring junior ones—the idealism and enthusiasm of young teachers quickly devolves into teachers as the “drones and clones of policymakers’ anemic ambitions” (Hargreaves 2003, 2) as they “crank out the scripted performances of the karaoke curriculum” (79). This lack of time to build a true professional community also translates into a lack of a student learning community (as they merely model what they see). There are wonderful exceptions to these trends (e.g., Hargreaves 2003, 127ff.), to be sure, but decades of critical literature (cf. Jonathan Kozol, Paulo Freire, et al.) have not dislodged the hegemony of education as a competition of individuals (Miller 2008, 37ff.).

Yet the authors mentioned in the Introduction won’t give up. Andy Hargreaves uses Tom Sergiovanni’s idea of developing “school character” (Hargreaves 2003, 60) in his discussion on “teaching beyond the knowledge society” (57ff.), i.e., a society where knowledge is valued over people. For Hargreaves, “successful teaching and learning occur when teachers have caring relationships with their students and when their students are emotionally engaged with their learning” (60). Once again, this seems so obvious; how tragic that we need to be reminded to care for our students. “The educational answer to the angst of early adolescence,” he continues, “is mainly to be found not in more [fragmented] curriculum but in stronger community” (61). What about the angst of the teachers? Here Hargreaves discusses the creation of a

“caring professional community” that provides teachers the development opportunities to “build character, maturity, and other virtues” so that their “ego boundaries, their senses of identity, are secure enough” to be “challenged by, evaluated by, or asked to work with other adults” (63, cf. 175). Teacher maturity is as underdeveloped an area of study as adult development in general. Child development theories abound, but once one reaches adulthood, there is a broad—and, I believe, erroneous—assumption that it’s all pretty much the same from then on. Is this not perhaps related to an individualism that says, in effect, I’m all grown up now, leave me alone? Hargreaves is clear: “Teaching...cannot be a refuge for second-choice careers” (66). The people our children learn from and model themselves after must be mature and continually maturing in the mentor-apprentice relationships of a caring professional community. This, in addition to the home, is one of the crucial places where morality—societal maturity—is built. Otherwise, “We live in a lopsided world of growing intolerance, individualism, exclusion, and insecurity” (65).

Demoralization

I find it more than curious that the overwhelming majority of articles in the peer-reviewed journal *Philosophy of Education* from 1996 to 2012 were about morals/ethics and multiculturalism (which are, of course, closely related). How we treat one another is on the mind of more than just philosophers. Michael Fullan, professor emeritus of the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education of the University of Toronto, has devoted a recent book, *The Moral Imperative Realized*, to addressing “the actual accomplishment of moral purpose in any endeavor—in this case, for

education” (2011, ix). Seeing his book as a realization of John Goodlad’s *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership* (2003), he says, “In 2003 the concept of moral purpose or moral imperative was fairly new” (ix). Even assuming that he means moral purpose was new *for education* in 2003, how could he say that? Had he not read Sergiovanni’s *Moral Leadership* (1996)? Or Nel Noddings or Dewey or Rousseau? What an odd statement to make. To make matters worse, he never clearly defines “moral.” Fullan states that “when he [John Goodlad] used the term *moral*, people were confused” (ix, emphasis in original), and then attempts to define it himself “for educational reform”:

...it should be clear that the moral imperative focuses on raising the bar and closing the gap in student learning and achievement for all children regardless of background. It is about a better society for individuals and for the collective. (ix, emphasis in original)

No mention of right and wrong, teaching and modeling good character, or allusions to virtues, values, and ethics. Just a nondiscriminatory increase in student achievement to make a “better society.” Fullan’s “moral imperative” for a more just and better society is admirable, but it is hardly “new.” And it doesn’t seem to get at the more general sense of demoralization that Brooks refers to in his *New York Times* article: society talks less and less about humility, compassion, and gratitude, and more and more about self, information, and “the bottom line.”

Yet the fault does not lie with Fullan, for whom it is obviously imperative to close the achievement gap (2011, 26). He wrestles with US educational policy—calling No Child Left Behind a “wrong and inadequate strategy” (2011, x)—and falling global educational ranking (from first to 24th) as he seeks “whole-system

reform” (57) to help create a society of economic equality (73-76). This is all well and good, but what about creating a more *moral* society?

Ted Sizer, one of the more luminous names in American education, was known for his big heart (Meier 2013, vii). In his posthumously published *The New American High School*, he addresses our nation’s demoralization on every page (explicitly or implicitly) through what I call his Philosophy of Constructive Messiness (cf. Sizer 2013, 34). For him, the moral society is found in a thriving democracy, something he readily admits is a “messy idea” (xviii, cf. also xxii, 9, 34, 105, 230), and toward that goal, “the ultimate purpose of education is to develop the ability to *understand* important matters well and to *use* those matters for worthwhile personal and social ends” (83, emphasis in original). Sizer’s “important,” “well,” and “worthwhile” are no more specific than Fullan’s “better society,” but he does offer more than a dozen chapters of concrete suggestions and illustrations intended to “nourish and nurture the habits needed for a strong democratic culture” (xii). Such “habits” (also 144, 152f.) include an openness (159) toward a diversity of individuals (65) and values (203), developing a flexible system (192), student self-confidence (59), media discernment (140) (“the need for each young mind to become a careful crap detector” (62)), nonconformity (40), and much more. “Teaching is a moral act,” Sizer says in his chapter entitled “Morality” (202). It is a chapter full of questions. “Who has the authority to mess with my child’s mind?” (205). “Do our [society’s] common values still exist?” (206). “What are the boundaries of a community?” (206). “Is it proper for a school—and the government that directs it—to hammer us [students] into one sort of person?” (216). One of Sizer’s suggestions is to move away from

“large, anonymous high schools” and toward “small schools or small, enclosed units within a large school” (209). This and other important educational reforms, he hopes, will help “[t]o create an environment of engagement...and that means it must center on topics that are relevant to the students and on important problems about which they want to be clear in their minds” (155). Otherwise our schools—and society—will merely “continue to stumble around” (229).

Student engagement is also a concern of Andy Hargreaves: “In high-school systems driven by performance results at the expense of relationships, too many adolescents find themselves disengaged from learning and alienated from the knowledge society” (2003, 49). In his book, *Teaching in the Knowledge Society*, he describes the knowledge society, or knowledge economy, as one “driven by creativity and ingenuity” (2003, 1).

In the knowledge economy, wealth and prosperity depend on people’s capacity to out-invent and outwit their competitors, to tune in to the desires and demands of the consumer market, and to change jobs or develop new skills as economic fluctuations and downturns require. (3)

If teachers do not understand the knowledge society, they cannot prepare their students for it. (2)

And yet, “[t]he knowledge society is a Trojan horse” (49):

The knowledge economy drives people to put their self-interest before the social good, to indulge in consumption instead of involving themselves in community, to enjoy the buzz of temporary teamwork more than to develop the long-term emotions of loyalty and perseverance that sustain the enduring commitments of group life. (3)

Loyalty. Perseverance. Who has time for those while “work[ing] frantically to keep up, stay successful, remain in the game” in this “culture of narcissism” (51)? We live in “the age of insecurity,” says Hargreaves, when

...people experience increasing job and pension insecurity, environmental degradation, the collapse of welfare safety nets, the erosion of supportive communities and relationships, and the growing threat of crime and violence to their physical and psychic safety. (42)

None of this is helped by the “soulless standardization” (2, 5, 6, 200, also cf. 86f., 200) that neither encourages creativity and ingenuity nor builds healthy learning communities. Hargreaves would like to “rehabilitat[e] the idea of teaching as a sacred vocation” (5), that is, to return the joy to teaching (120), to release teachers from their isolation (109, 163), and to enable them to reinject into their classrooms the social and emotional values that are crucial to creating the kind of learning community that builds character, security, integrity, sympathy, democracy, and maturity (66).

I am grouping values together with morals, a revaluation with remoralization, but the questions remain, how do we accomplish this, and who is responsible? What is the government’s role?

Governmentalization

Democrats have never seen a government program they didn’t like. Republicans want a small government (except for a gargantuan military and other pet projects). The Supreme Court is selling our democracy to the highest bidder. These are the sound bites we get from our (supposedly) free press. The approval ratings for our elected officials seem to set new lows each year. Who in their right mind would trust the government with the education of their children? Apparently, the majority of American families (88% of American children attend public school; National Center

for Education Statistics 2013). Valid criticisms notwithstanding, government can—and still does in many cases—provide the necessary authority to ensure public justice.

Stephanie Summers, the Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Public Justice, suggests that the “[g]overnment has at least three key responsibilities in setting educational standards” (2014). First, it is one of the stakeholders—along with the parents, businesses, et al.—in determining “what constitutes a well-educated mind.” Second, “in order for citizens to have equal opportunities to participate in the political community and obtain employment,” the government can require students to demonstrate their proficiency in “meeting articulated benchmarks or standards.” Third, she hastens to add, the demonstration of proficiency “should not promote or establish a common curriculum” or “determine the worldview...taught in classrooms or homes.” For the sake of equal access to democratic responsibilities and gainful employment, government oversight seems appropriate, but what about reversing a society’s slide into individualism and demoralization? Isn’t that in the national interest? Yet how does a government intervene in such child-rearing values without establishing a common curriculum? The avoidance of such a directive is surely necessary to maintaining a healthy diversity of worldviews, but is there no common ground from which we can combat our society’s illnesses? These are murky waters.

Hargreaves, Sergiovanni, Sizer, and Fullan all agree that government overreach (“governmentalization”) is unacceptable:

...curriculum standards have largely degenerated into soulless standardization. (Hargreaves 2003, 5)

...standardization is the great friend of mediocrity but the enemy of imagination and excellence. (Sergiovanni 2005, 10)

Americans should not be in the habit of insisting on one best system, as the chances are that this one system will ram one set of facts, beliefs, and values down students' throats. (Sizer 2013, 192)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)...was...[the] wrong and inadequate strategy to implement moral purpose on any scale. (Fullan 2011, x)

Fullan is not alone in calling NCLB a mistake. One of its leading architects, Diane Ravitch, formerly the assistant secretary of education under President George W. Bush, "is among the few national public figures in education who have shown the courage to acknowledge publicly that the policies she promoted were wrong" (Nine 2014, 45). *Yes!* magazine's recent education issue highlights the successes and failures of government education (i.e., public schools). The editor's exposé reveals that President Bush's NCLB and President Obama's augmentation, "Race to the Top," build on the statistical inaccuracies of President Reagan's "A Nation at Risk" (Paton 2014, 19)—all to the multibillion dollar annual profit of test assessment and textbook corporations like Pearson (20). Where governmentalization and corporatization join hands, democracy suffers.

Sizer is adamant that American public high schools "are the oxygen of democracy" (2013, xix). He continues: "there is not, nor ever should be, one perfect educational system sent down from on high for America to put in place. Democracies should never be the seedbeds of autocratic, top-down control. Freedom is necessarily messy" (xxii). He's right. It's messy. Life is messy. Teaching kids is messy. As is our perennial temptation to control it, measure it, categorize it. Certainty becomes our god.

Evaluation

It is time to e-evaluate, to “out” our values—no more letting them hide in the closet. We began with Sergiovanni’s valuing of community and the stunning revelation that people seem to have forgotten this fundamental human need. David Brooks reported our society’s devaluing of morals as well as an increasing valuing of individualism and government: not a valuing of the *balance* between the individual “I” and the governmental “we,” but a tug-of-war between a possessive “my” and a governmental “it.” The *Philosophy of Education* journal values morals/ethics and multiculturalism. Fullan values closing the gap in student achievement, and Sizer values a healthy democracy. All of them value public education yet are wary of soulless standardization.

Everyone has values; we all value some things more than others. I find it difficult to believe that somewhere in the corridors of power, people are striving to destroy community, erase morals, and spread soulless standardization—and yet that, according to the aforementioned writers, is exactly where we find ourselves. There are those who believe that if we all just become Christians or evolve to a higher stage of consciousness (or both) that everything will be fine. And there are those who would let the world go to hell since the Messiah or Jesus (or both) is coming soon. But for those of us determined to make the most of the here and now, with so many different beliefs, with our loved ones to care for and our children to educate, how do we find common ground, common values—short of starting our own separatist communities?

Pardon me. My values are showing. It is impossible for me to remain value-neutral. I have revealed that I value the here and now, caring for loved ones, educating children, and finding common ground with others who have different beliefs. My values, like everyone else (I assume), have been shaped by my upbringing, influenced by society, and revalued through experience. Among other things, I value a here-and-now creation declared “good” by its Sculptor, and I value the presence of God found in the marginalized (Matt 25:40). And I would be willing to bet that Horace Mann, the whipping boy of progressive educators, held similar values as he helped to create the publicly funded “common” schools in mid-nineteenth century America. Not a bad idea—expedient to say the least—when dealing with a massive influx of immigrants needing an authoritative picture of their new home. Unfortunately it didn’t work out so well in the long run, turning into an “educational monoculture” (Miller 2008, 28) with a tenacity that has yet to be shaken.

It is right here that I find the educational alternative movement so interesting, and Ron Miller so helpful. Miller is a professor at Champlain College and has written dozens of books and articles on the movement. It is a wide umbrella including libertarian philosophies (e.g., Neill and Holt), progressive education (from Dewey to Vygotsky), critical pedagogy (e.g., Freire and Kozol), spiritual development philosophies (e.g., Montessori and Steiner), integral philosophies (e.g., Wilber), and homeschooling. Yet nowhere does he mention typical Christian (e.g., CSI and ACSI), Catholic (parochial), or Jewish schools. I believe the omission is due to the fact that most religious schools are systemic sellouts, viz., despite their overt religious veneer (e.g., Bible-based curriculum, confessional standards for teachers, etc.), they remain

part of Mann's educational monoculture: grade levels, "eggcrate"/industrial model classrooms, transmission of textbook facts, standardized testing, teacher/classroom fiefdoms, preparation for (economic) success in a free-market capitalist society, an Enlightenment bequeathed faith in progress and theory of knowledge as certainty, etc. For Miller: "The vision I propose is at once 'conservative' (advocating parental freedom of choice) and 'social democratic' (placing such choice in a cultural context that challenges both free market and narrow sectarian ideologies)" (2008, 47). He lays out five principles that he values for education:

- Respect for every person, including children (human rights)
- Balance (openness rather than fixed ideology)
- Decentralization of authority (human scale democracy)
- Noninterference between political, economic, and cultural spheres of society
- A holistic or integral perspective (48)

Surely these are five areas where schools of all kinds—public, religious, private secular, et al.—can meet to shake the tenacious hold of that educational monoculture.

This might be a good place to conclude, but to close (*cludere*) with (*con*) Miller might give the false impression that we had found the answer to school reform and could now safely close the (closet) door—when the truth is that we have merely opened a can of worms (stalking the teacher's apple). Instead I would like to create an aperture (*aperire*, to open), to throw the door wide open to the outdoors, by expressing how much I value our "good" creational home. Schools are increasingly focused on "ecoliteracy" (cf. Fullan 2013, 28), but all too often it's "greenwashing" or "eco-lite" rather than a penetrating critique of how and why we've gone so far—too far—in abusing our planetary life-support system. What is desperately needed (by every mainstream scientific measure) is a new way of living, a new worldview, an

ecological worldview, that will enable the next several generations to weather the challenges of increasingly severe and costly meteorological events, a few billion more mouths to feed, resource wars, climate refugees, rising energy costs, etc. I believe it is vitally important to avoid the Scylla of Progress (“Oh, we’ll figure out something.”) and the Charybdis of Apocalypse (“We can’t stop it. Why even try?”), both of which lead to supporting the status quo (with an ecofriendly bumper sticker) (Greer 2014). Suppose we were alive 50-100 years before the collapse of the Roman Empire and had the foresight to see what was coming. How might we prepare our children for their future and their children’s future? And, if we were so inclined, how might we prepare them to care for the “good” creation and the God-in-the-marginalized?

Resources

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