

## **We Teach How We've Been Taught: Expeditionary Learning Unshackling Sustainability Education in U.S. Public Schools**

**Stephanie A. Owens**

Roots & Wings Community Charter School

**Abstract:** Millions of youth in the United States today are mandated to go to “work” daily. Indoor spaces, hard, plastic seats, and inauthentic menial tasks characterize their workplace. In a time in which the life support systems of our planet are imperiled and more humans are living in communities of poverty and violence, there exists an absurd disconnect between how education is currently practiced and the education that is needed to facilitate deep cultural revolution. Our teachers are taught to teach using the same irrelevant pedagogies, sitting in rows inside institutions of higher learning, taking notes, and memorizing disconnected facts for regurgitation on multiple-choice exams. My argument is that we are not going to be able to implement any true attempts in sustainability education without concomitant change in the way we teach teachers. While publicly funded schools still provide an equalizing agent to potentially provide opportunity for all children regardless of their race or social class, no school can truly educate children to meet the coming demands of our time without experiential teacher education. Expeditionary Learning, a national reform model for public schools, creates lasting change in the praxis of teaching by creating opportunities for teachers to learn in a different way than they have often been taught as students themselves. With continued coaching when they return to their classrooms, teachers are able to create learning environments embodying inquiry and authenticity so that our youth are empowered to affect societal change.

**Keywords:** K-12 education, teacher education, pedagogy, experiential education, sustainability education

## **Introduction: The Perpetuation of an Antiquated Education System**

"There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."

—Jane Thompson, (as cited in Mayo, 1999, p. 5), drawing on Paulo Freire

When I first began teaching in a college of education, my excitement hinged on modeling a different way of educating teachers – characterized by a more engaging and project-based approach. One afternoon, after wrapping up my class, I was walking down the broad hallway in the education building and overheard a professor say the word “constructivism.” The essence of the constructivist philosophy is that teachers create an environment in which students confront new experiences and challenging questions, fostering a sense of not knowing, of disequilibrium, and motivating them to actively construct their own answers (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1985). I looked in this classroom of higher learning and saw the professor lecturing from the podium to at least thirty underclassmen sitting in rows, facing the front of the room, and racing to take notes on constructivism in education. At this moment, the crux of the issue plaguing our education system became glaringly evident to me. Constructivist teachers are expected to create the ideal classroom by providing students opportunities for engaging with ideas in authentic contexts and around productive group tasks. If pre-service teachers have not themselves experienced a new way of learning in their training, how can they teach in a different way than stand-and-deliver? If we continue to educate our teachers by initiating them into the status quo, we will both continue to fail in educating our children and in initiating a revolutionary process of societal reform.

When most teachers enter active teaching after completing their teacher education program, they are confronted with a professional landscape in which the craft and science of teaching has been removed from the teachers' domain and placed in the hands of textbook companies, online learning, and district pacing. I believe that many professionals unquestionably accept this state of affairs, as it is so familiar to their own education and teacher training. They have not been exposed to an alternative model of education. In conventional training programs, rigor is defined as good note-taking and test-taking skills and equates learning with knowing the right answers. Such narrow teacher education provides very little actual experience in providing participatory and creative learning environments or even working with children for any substantial length of time. Those teachers dissatisfied with the reality of teaching in our mainstream public schools, who want to experience something different for themselves and their students, often do not know where to begin. This obstacle is especially true for teachers committed to integrating environmental education into their curriculum. How can one “cover” the curriculum presented in standards and textbooks and have additional time to investigate environmental issues and create avenues for real student-initiated action and change? A certain paralysis in the craft can occur from the pressure of cramming information into students' brains, the fear of failing test scores, and the impact of performance-based merit systems on pay.

A good deal of the problem may have arisen from trying to educate all students *equally*, when only recently the goal of public education has become that of educating every child to the same standard. Like adding onto an old home where one can never escape the limitations of the original foundation, our current structures are jumbled around an archaic foundation that initially never intended to provide equal educational opportunity to all children. In describing the history of our current system, Hess (2010) argues that recent efforts to effect reform struggle because of the early history of our education model since our country's founding. The social architects of this country intended for education to be provided for the sons of wealthy male landowners – period. The debate in the late 1700's was around how many children of poverty might be provided scholarships to attend school in order to climb the social ladder. Thomas Jefferson believed that, *at most*, three poor boys per state should be given that chance. At this time, a second area of contention centered upon whether or not all children should receive educational instruction in basic literacy and arithmetic to the equivalent of our 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. An argument never existed concerning whether or not all children should be given an *equal* chance at advancement in society through educational opportunity. Mandatory public education laws did not arrive on the scene until the early portion of the 1900's when an effort by unions ended child labor, thus removing a cheap labor source from the workforce in order to create jobs and drive up pay scales for adults (Hess, 2010).

Even now, with mandatory education laws enforcing school attendance for children until at least age 16 and No Child Left Behind legislation trying to require equal educational opportunity for all students, our system still engenders oppression. John Taylor Gatto (2005) delivers a scathing critique of our current structures for schooling, defining our public schools as “an essential support system for a model of social engineering that condemns most people to be subordinate stones in a pyramid that narrows as it ascends to a terminal of control” (p. 13). Rather than guaranteeing an equitable footing for opportunity, the structures and activities within our dominant paradigm for education undermine democracy, as defined by the existence of social equality in which all members of a society have a share in producing and directing social institutions (Dewey, 1938). Rather, our current system functions to create a permanent underclass and transmits social inequality from one generation to the next – a force known as social reproduction (Doob, 2013).

### **Educating for a consumerist meritocracy**

The major defining characteristic of our conventional system is that of a meritocracy. It works to the advantage of those people who are defined as *deserving* privileged social standing – white, male, higher social classes. These students respond to our general philosophy of education with success. Simply put, the student is raw material in an industrialized process characterized by an institutional assembly line churning out finished product. The products, or graduates, are all educated in the same way so that information is “banked” in their minds. The modes of instruction engendered by this philosophy, such as the lecture, are only successful, as measured by the test score, for certain children of certain social demographics. These ways of teaching more closely match the home environments, the subculture, of children from higher social classes. Different communities, most easily defined by socioeconomic status, learn, use, and value language differently. These differences result in unique ways of using language in social control and collaboration as well as to express an individual's own identity. When these linguistic schemas do not match the instructional structures of schools – the manner in which

information is acquired and proficiency demonstrated – then school is a poor fit and fails to meet every student's framework for learning with equal success (Heath, 1983). This system is a prime contributor to the maintenance of a society in which most people are oppressed, meaning that the majority of people are the workers whose primary task is to create the wealth and maintain the lifestyles of the power elite (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, by educating students to be consumers that fit into the machinery of our capitalistic, hyper-competitive culture and to be scientifically managed and controlled, we inadequately prepare children for taking an active role in society (Combs, Miser, & Whitaker, 1999; Gatto, 2005). The ingenuity, passion, and creativity of the youth are dismissed as folly, relegated to a side conversation rather than the driving focus of learning. And this travesty is perpetuated just when we need creative young who are more engaged with an increasingly dynamic, globalized world in which we are hurtling our way into periods of economic destabilization, food and water scarcity, war, and extreme climate change. As a result of the removal of their voices from the public sphere, I believe we have further inculcated feelings of nihilism in our youth, contributing to a vicious cycle of numb materialism, violence, and passive addiction to media. In fact, many children are seemingly indifferent to the adult world (Gatto, 2005) – a violation of our very biology! Yet, given the realities of our society and the complex interface other structures have on our system of schooling (e.g., placing schooling in schools rather than the home affords the opportunity for women to enter the workforce), how can we function in the constraints of compulsory education and merit determined by test scores to create a new way of “doing” school?

### **Charting a new course**

In my various roles as college professor, middle school teacher, charter school founder, and consultant for a national reform model, I have come to recognize two primary areas of opportunity to transform our education system while simultaneously maintaining a structure that is government funded and universally accessible. First, a degree of school choice needs to exist for families. Public schooling is crucial to creating educational opportunity for all children – just imagine a future with publicly funded schools removed from inner cities or extremely rural communities.

Charter schools are an effective means to ensure school choice. The purpose of the charter school movement in our country was to provide reform to the process of social reproduction, not the dismantlement of public education, as some would argue. Essentially, the reality is that people of means have always had school choice (i.e., private school). The charter school movement, with missions informed by the unique needs of the local community, provides a tuition-free choice for all families (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2013). Charter schools are designed to use our consumer economy to provide competition and, hopefully, create impetus for other public schools to increase the quality of their programs. Charter schools are thought to encourage reform through the adoption of an explicit educational model (e.g., Core Knowledge, Kipp Academies, Expeditionary Learning) that demands a different method of instruction, in contrast to the mode entrenched in public district schools. Often, when district schools are faced threat due to competition, they rally around the cry that charter schools are siphoning money from public education. However, charter schools *are* public schools; and, ultimately, the public funds allocated for each student belongs to that student, not any particular school per se.

Still, schools can only provide alternatives if the teachers who create them can implement a new way of being and teaching. In my experience, many charter schools are ineffective in reform because they merely recreate the standard education system. Therefore, the second area of reform on which we should focus is that of teacher professional development. Within public schools, financial resources need to be prioritized primarily for teachers and their continuing education ahead of textbooks and even technology.

### **Expeditionary Learning: A re-vision of teacher education**

For the past 10 years of my career, I have been affiliated with the national public school reform model, Expeditionary Learning (EL), both as a middle school teacher and as a consultant working directly for EL. Expeditionary Learning was born in the late 1980's as part of the Harvard Outward Bound project. Based on the work of educator Kurt Hahn, EL is grounded in 10 Design Principles that include foci on diversity and inclusion, the natural world, solitude and reflection, empathy and caring, and service and compassion. Since its inception, the mission has been to provide teacher professional development grounded in the research on educational best practices in the domains of curriculum, instruction, and school leadership.

Beginning with just 10 pilot schools, EL now contracts with around 160 schools nationwide, serving an educational community about the size of an urban school district. These schools are primarily public district schools, but also include a substantial number of public charter schools, and are located in urban and rural communities (Expeditionary Learning, 2012). Most importantly, and consistent with the social justice orientation of EL, a program evaluation by Ulichny (2000) determined that "Expeditionary Learning implementation appear[ed] to be providing a strong academic curriculum that allow[ed] students from typically disadvantaged backgrounds to thrive" (p. 107). The results of this study attest to the power of changing our standard educational narrative, that of expert teachers and passive students, to one of relationship and authentic action in the world.

While many models of education reform involving teacher professional development exist and create positive gains for teachers and students, the philosophy underlying the EL model is defined by a commitment to social and environmental justice. As a result, the professional development of teachers remains true to this philosophy and actually makes a difference in the implementation of environmental education in EL schools (Riordan & Klein, 2010). The professional development of EL teachers looks very different than traditional models of teacher training. In a typical EL institute, teachers and administrators experience life as a student engaging in inquiry around either important worldly topics, such as climate change or the civil rights movement, or professional topics, such as data analysis to inform instruction. The facilitators of professional courses model the "moves" of the teacher in creating a learning environment in which the participant is no longer an object to fill but a subject capable of thought, creativity, and solutions. In addition to providing an alternative learning experience, another reason EL teacher training makes a difference for teachers is that the organization also provides on-going support to teachers back in their schools, with coaching as well as informing the use of time and resources in the overarching structure and leadership of the institution. This scaffolding has been found to be crucial to the implementation of inquiry-based education around authentic topics and tasks in which teachers and students must collaborate to accomplish complex and lofty goals culminating in authentic action (Riordan & Klein, 2010; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). To embrace constructivist teaching, as advocated by the EL

best practices, is an active rejection of bureaucratized, essentialist (i.e., teaching the facts) education. The constructivist alternative demands that teachers are learners themselves who possess a high degree of precision and commitment to the creation of learning environments that stimulate the asking and answering of hard questions (Hess, 2010). To develop and maintain these characteristics requires continual professional renewal. And the required investment of time and money in teachers and their own growth and development pays off for students and, by extension, the institution and society at large.

With the focus on teachers and best practices in education, test scores follow. In EL schools in which their annual evaluation indicates a high level of implementation, more students attain levels of proficiency in math and English language arts when compared to state and district rates. This success is achieved without teaching to the test, as is so common in other public schools. But I believe the most important contribution of the Expeditionary Learning model is in the humanizing of education for children, in opposition to the industrialized model in which learning is defined as the accumulation of information. The EL orientation demands a deep relationship between teacher and student, as well as with their community, and moves the disenfranchised in our society – the youth – out of the margins.

Within an EL school, the teacher is free to become a learner and enter into dialogue with students around real issues. And when the problems encountered are authentic, learners rise to the challenge (Freire, 1970). As a teacher, I am discovering meaning alongside students while creating a learning environment for students to explore multiple perspectives on real issues. Last spring, we were investigating water issues in New Mexico and the complexities of water appropriation, in particular addressing how we support the state economy and the growth of cities and still maintain a culture of farming and ranching. I was staying mere steps ahead of the students on topics such as shifting demographics in our state and water law so I could develop the content expertise needed to engage them in a consequential and timely topic. They became experts on this pressing issue in our state through the process of publishing a book and creating a documentary film designed to educate the public about water availability in our state in a time of climate change. As a second example, a Superfund site is less than 10 miles from our small school in northern New Mexico. As a team of teacher and students, we confront essential questions: What is molybdenum? Why is it mined? How is it polluting groundwater? We learn that *we* are the reason; we have bicycles, knives, stainless steel pots, and cars – all of which require molybdenum to strengthen the metal. How do we solve this problem? Not just in the future but now? These questions, with direct impact on students' lives, are what motivate learning, not the abstract specter of test scores.

With the freedom to pursue an education grappling with authentic problems, we engage in *true* education that results in the making of meaning for ourselves from our experiences (ASCD, 1978). Revolutionary societies attempting to transcend a culture of oppression, in which members of society are subject to degradation and servitude, must begin by creating a system of education that allows the freedom to explore the fundamental question, “why?” This question exposes sources of inequality and a worldview that the earth's resources, including humans, are commodities here for exploitation. “Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 69). Answering why questions results in slowing down the pace of learning so that depth is experienced, rather than “covering” every content standard. We begin to foster intelligent people who can explore problems from many sides, reflect on their own behaviors, and take true action. In this paradigm, teachers are free to work

to help all students see themselves as learners and masters of their own destiny. And, most interestingly, we can actually more effectively meet standards while simultaneously supporting aspects of humanity neglected by our current educational model: home and civic membership; mental and physical health; effective use of leisure time; ethical character; and, most importantly, knowledge of self (Combs, 1965; Krishnamurti, 1953). Achievement of proficiency as judged by test scores follows this devotion to holistic education and not just for the privileged for whom our system generally works but equally for the underprivileged. Ironically, students are best equipped for achievement within the dominant culture's narrow definition of education when they are actually liberated from a school day in servitude to those same strictures. This environment of genuine inquiry can only be created if teachers and students can practice true constructivism in the classroom. If our aim is a democratic society in which there exists care for our planet and for one another, then school must reflect democratic principles with the belief that all children can learn and make meaning to achieve the end result of taking thoughtful ethical action for the betterment of society (Combs, 1991). Educating the young can be a subversive activity, and the education of teachers is crucial to the transformation of our society.

## References

- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Working Group on Humanistic Education. (1978). *Humanistic education: Objectives and assessment*. Washington, D.C.
- Combs, A. W. (1965). *The professional education of teachers: A perceptual view of teacher education*. Boston, Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, Inc.
- Combs, A. W. (1991) *The schools we need: New assumptions for educational reform*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc.
- Combs, A. W.; Miser, A. B.; & Whitaker, K. S. (1999). *On becoming a school leader: A person-centered challenge*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & McLaughlin, M. W. (1995). Policies that support professional development in an era of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(8), 597-604.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. New York, New York: Collier/Macmillan.
- Doob, C. (2013). *Social inequality and social stratification in U.S. society*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Expeditionary Learning. (2011-2012). History. Retrieved from <http://elschools.org/about-us/history>.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Gatto, J. T. (1992). *Dumbing us down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Hess, F. M. (2010). *The same thing over and over: How school reformers get stuck in yesterday's ideas*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Krishnamurti, J. (1953). *Education and the significance of life*. New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Mayo, P. (1999). *Gramsci, Freire and adult education: Possibilities for transformative action*. London: Zed Books.
- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2013). Why charter schools? Retrieved from <http://www.publiccharters.org/About-Charter-Schools/Why-charter-schools003F.aspx>.
- Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams, and imitation in childhood*. (C. Gattengno & F.M. Hodgson, Trans.). New York, N.Y.: Norton. (Original work published in 1945).
- Riordan, M. & Klein, E. J. (2010). Environmental education in action: How Expeditionary Learning schools support classroom teachers in tackling issues of sustainability. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 35(4), 1-19.
- The Center for Educational Reform. (2011).
- Ulichny, P. (2000). *Academic achievement in two Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound demonstration schools*. Retrieved from Expeditionary Learning website: <http://elschools.org/sites/default/files/Ulichny.pdf>.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1986). *Thought and language* (translated by Kozulin, A.). Cambridge, M.A.: The MIT Press.

*Owens*



EXPEDITIONARY  
LEARNING