



The Grey Faces of Education and Democracy

John R. Wiens

Future history is not inscribed already by the pen of a causal law which merely waits unrolling; its characters are stamped by the unforeseeable decisions of future generations. The part to be played in this by everyone alive today, by every adolescent and child, is immeasurable, and immeasurable is our part if we are educators. The deeds of the generations now approaching can illumine the grey face of the human world or plunge it in darkness. So, then, with education: if it at last rises up and exists indeed, it will be able to strengthen the light-spreading force in the hearts of the doers - how much it can do this cannot be guessed, but only learned in action . . . education must become a reality.”
- Martin Buber (1947:99)

Sobering words of hope for writing a better future - if we take education seriously.

Buber’s words, offered in 1925 to an international educational conference in Heidelberg, Germany, resonate for me in a way that they could not have for his early twentieth century, pre-Holocaust audience. First, I find them astoundingly prescient given what happened between when they were spoken and their publication. I find their insights to be timeless - reminders as worthy of our time and attention today as then. They encourage me to share my latest thoughts, anxieties and fears. Not to frighten my friends. Not to push my readers to further cynicism or despair if they’re so inclined. Not to blame anyone. And certainly not to provide answers. My hope is to begin a conversation with anyone who wishes to join, either in their thoughts or in their responses, so that we might together “illumine the grey face(s)” of education and democracy.

The metaphor of the grey face, to my way of thinking, describes accurately where we find ourselves today in regard to the two human ideals we call education and democracy. That is the point I take up first by offering some perspectives on our current proclivities which, I believe, have the distinct potential for plunging these ideals into even greater darkness. Then I touch on the immeasurable consequences of educational, or adult-child, relationships to which Buber refers, next extending that to the public-private character of illumination and darkness as it affects our notions of schooling and government. Finally, I want to throw out a challenge and express a hope along the lines of “democracy cannot be a reality unless education is and education cannot be a reality unless democracy is” - they are two sides of the same face which demand our constant, unremitting love.

Greyness

My most enduring memories of greyness are the faces of dear friends, older relatives and newer acquaintances in palliative care, world weary but alive. I visit. I try to bring news and joy - a reprieve from the tedious greyness - talking a lot about our grandchildren. Talk of children always seems to cheer them up. Miraculously against all odds, some recover to extend their time with me. Did my visits help - or was it the hope that children represent that things will be better? From my vantage point, education and democracy are today in palliative care - not yet terminal. Teachers and schools are providing round the clock care, kindly administering curricula and conducting tests to keep their students and themselves alive.

Arguably, the departure point of our Canadian education into the grey was “The Blueprint” of the 1990s, actualized as a series of blueprints across our provinces and territories. As they fade into the inevitable greyness, their offspring linger in the long shadows they cast, continuing to pollute and pervert the educational atmosphere with hostile power plays and accountability regimes. I offer as example a lingering vocabulary: children as raw materials, products, customers and consumers; adults as resources, clients, stakeholders and taxpayers - stifling metaphors. I offer as ample proof the interference by governments of all stripes into educational governance, and international, national and provincial standardized testing schemes. The first attacks and reduces the space for local self-determination by pre-determining the conditions of resource allocation, almost always for the purposes of a centralized political agenda. The second ensures that a singular vision of and for the good, written by the powerful and the wealthy, is inscribed upon the foreheads of our children and young people. In the words of a former Minister of Education, “there’s not enough room in the life raft” for some of them. But this could not happen without our tacit approval.

We are encouraged to think first of ourselves, even only of ourselves, and leave government to the experts. While our public institutions - schools, hospitals, public regulators - languish, their public purposes - education, health care and safety - wither and the people in them grow weary and forgetful. Akin to a sale at Walmart, our political leaders promise us more and more for less bother and effort. They entice us with lower taxes, less regulation, in other words, less responsibility and less involvement. How undemocratic is it that more and more power accrues to fewer and fewer people, and that the enduring message is leave government to us. How alarming that they might be, for the moment, accurate in their assessment of us that we’re either too greedy, lazy, self-absorbed or just generally not up to much to soil our hands with the dirty business of politics.

Illuminating Reminders: Adults and Children

But all is not lost. Whenever either my academic colleague, David Coulter, or I ask children, young people or adults to tell us about someone they consider to be an “educated person,” by which we mean to imply someone who has achieved an education, they are not only quick to respond but come up with descriptions that are remarkably similar (2008:6 - 20). As one person put it, “we’re just talking about good people - educated people are good people.” With those words he had joined a centuries old educational conversation and quest: “how can we help our children and young people to live good lives?” On that level of abstraction Western education has not changed since it was first conceived and recorded by the Greeks, and that memory has not been lost to our consciousness.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, world-renowned political philosopher and critic, standing on the shoulders of Hannah Arendt, illuminates the treasure called education in a particularly human way:

“Education is always cast as the means whereby some, or all, citizens of a particular society get their bearings and learn to live with and among one another. Education always reflects a society’s views of what is excellent, worthy, necessary” (1993:82).

I always find the Greek origins of this sentiment helpful and enlightening. To the Greeks the aim of education was eudaimonia, roughly translated as “human flourishing.” As is true today, this concept of education has two aspects: individual flourishing and collective flourishing. The first is what we might call “education”; the second “democracy.” The first exists for the sake of and makes possible the second; the second makes possible and gives meaning to the first. Both, if we are not vigilant and purposeful, can fade into grey purgatory, either to be barely discernible or to disappear altogether.

What causes the greyness of twilight to slip into the darkness of night? Hannah Arendt, perhaps the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, claims this happens when we cease to love our children and our world, our collective adult selves, or our way of life called democracy:

“Education is the point at which we decide we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it . . . and education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough . . . to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world” (1968:196).

Earlier she states: “all of us . . . must take toward them (children and young people) an attitude radically different from the one we take toward one another” (1968:195); and, [the more] “modern society discards the distinction between what is private and public . . . what can thrive only in concealment and what needs to be shown to all in

the full light of the public world . . . the harder it makes things for children” (1968:188).

First, she means children and young people must be treated radically differently than I treat other adults. Ideally, all adults should consider every encounter with a child or children potentially an educational experience. By our actions we can demonstrate their importance to the world: including them when appropriate and beneficial, excluding them when propriety is in question; taking time to listen and understand as well as direct and command; and generally shielding them from adult judgments and decisions. For example, we might protect them from being targeted by the adult marketplace, enticed by adult images of the good life - adult body images, dress and relationships. And when the adult world does rush in on our children uninvited, adults need to be there to help restore the appropriate adult-child relationship.

Second, she implies we’re making public things that should remain hidden and privatizing things that should be open to the light of day and, in so doing, we’re making it harder for our children to be educated. In other words, something happens to educational activity that can hurt young people - if it’s too transparent, too open to public scrutiny and critique. We know this already - we have movie and games ratings, Internet filters, restricted entry to clubs and the like. Nevertheless our TVs and computers make it awfully easy to bring what is best left in private into children’s lives. Child abuse in all its forms - sexual, physical, and/or otherwise emotional - is in fact the greatest violation of the private-public, child-adult divide and the most vivid testament to adults’ losing their sense of love for the world. When the public world sneaks into the lives of adolescents, we need to be there to restore the private-public distinction.

Ideally, all adults are responsible for all children - it is a human duty. If we do so respectfully, thoughtfully, lovingly, with their interests in mind, it follows that we must all be involved in the education of all children. "Their interests" means keeping in mind their unwritten future, their potential to become the kind of adults they wish to be and to build the kind of world in which they would like to live. The fact that we're a long way from getting it right doesn't mean that we can abandon the task.

If not everyone is inclined or suited for this work, then we who want to call ourselves teachers, educators, school trustees, must be even more vigilant and committed to representing the best of what the world has to offer. Our joint responsibility in a democracy implies our saying, "this is the world we have built for you with our best efforts; we are educating you to join us - when you're ready and prepared - to make it better in ways that we can all agree on. A world common in the sense that it is inclusive and everyone has a rightful, recognized and responsible place - a world we can all be proud of and enjoy. A future that represents our best collective imagination."

Private-Public: Protecting the Political

Arendt reminds us that "children . . . by nature, require the security of concealment in order to mature undisturbed," and that "school . . . is . . . the institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the [public] world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all" (1968:188). In other words, schools are somewhat private and somewhat public - it is a place where we judge carefully how much the outside world can encroach.

For us this privacy includes not having children's particular actions open to public scrutiny; they must be able to make mistakes and errors in judgment without public consequences. For Arendt, this

privacy means students' being allowed to think, judge and sometimes test, privately what is fit for publicity - public exposure or public involvement - and how they wish to and should appear as individuals in the public world. In other words, this somewhat private education prepares them to go public, to enter the public world when they are ready.

I understand Arendt and Elshtain to make several important contentions regarding education and democracy. First, education is for children and young people; democracy is the realm of adults. Second, in order for children and young people to become democratic citizens, they must be prepared through education which is a mostly private activity. Third, what education means, or what constitutes education, is a public matter, to be decided between serious and engaged "educated" adults. Fourth, private agendas and public agendas pursued privately are a violation of democratic politics. Fifth, reaching a definition of education is always a somewhat tentative, somewhat provisional activity which is always open to further adjustment contingent on the context of the world's prevailing notions of the good and the continuous entry into that conversation of participants there for the first time.

It is also a conversation that is every adult citizen's business and responsibility which they can claim by virtue of their education. Coulter and I, returning to the beginning, would add as further clarification that, while all people including children have a somewhat common conception of the good, adult and children's roles are very different. The role of children, with the help of adults, is to develop their understanding and love of democracy. They must learn how to engage others in a civil discussion about what it means to be democratic so that they can enter the democratic dialogue about its conditions, obligations and consequences in responsive and

responsible ways. Here is where the going gets tough in today's world (2008:298-314).

We adults are grey - fickle, forgetful and complacent, even ambivalent - about our democratic heritage, and seemingly in the dark about the possibility that is always fragile, an incomplete project that we could potentially lose. Of course, we Canadians enjoy our positive rights and freedoms - the right to vote, the right to natural justice of assembly, thought, speech, mobility and trumpet our negative freedoms - freedom from unlawful confinement, hatemongering, fear, hunger and deprivation. But we are truly careless about our need to be involved and about the conditions that make democratic engagement possible.

We make the same mistake with democracy as we do with education - we take it for granted. We act as if education is defined by, equal to or dependent on schooling; and we act as if democracy equals government. Education happens everywhere and all the time as does democracy or its absence. The private and the public existed before our schools and our governments. We must learn to talk about them differently.

Education and Democracy

We need to remind ourselves and tell our children that the reason we're sending them to school is to become democratic citizens. The late Tom Green, a well known educational philosopher, decries our deep silence about our democratic hopes for education: "(education reform) movements remain virtually silent on the role of education in the formation of the public" (1999:149). Like him, I ask, how can we talk about educating children and youth without engaging them in discussion about the democratic virtues, about how democratic people relate to and act toward each other, about what constitutes democratic action? How can we educate without telling them that the reason we're educating them is to support and renew our democratic way of life?

We can tell them that this is why they study literature, languages, mathematics, music, art and science - so that they can build a public through tradition and memory, a tradition that includes inquiry, critique, dialogue and contestation, and a memory that connects all of us to each other as co-sojourners on earth. All curricula can help us not only to understand and judge how much and in what ways to be like others, how and when to act unlike others, the purposes of both. Children can learn the consequences of not being able to imagine others' life narratives as theirs and theirs as ours, and both as democratic responsibilities connected to our collective well being.

What passes for education is clearly a public concern. The formation of a "public" is an inclusive and egalitarian ideal and imperative for the democratic ideal to be realized, which Green calls "an educational achievement" (1999:149). In the ideal, as in a democratic public, we must declare openly and act accordingly that everyone matters. Everyone matters equally to the point where they can participate in the development and renewal of the public. Everyone's ideas matter inasmuch as they can be judged to benefit all. And, everyone's actions matter for the consequences they have for everyone else. Nobody matters more because of greater entitlement by birth, access to more of the world's resources or greater intellectual, physical or spiritual prowess. Democracy can only survive and thrive if all adults take seriously their responsibility to educate all children through their behaviour, their activities, their actions and particularly their speech. For it is only speech that has the power to express the democratic ideal which is possible to name and define - but not to live. It is only through speech that we have the right to persuade others ethically and politically to consider our particular perspectives.

Force and violence don't cut it, nor does coercive and denigrating speech. Thus, in order to live democratically, we must not only learn to speak about democracy but to speak democratically, in other words carefully - truthfully, invitingly, encouragingly and inclusively. It is upon this latter ideal that our school system was, at least in part, founded and supported. While it may not be the only purpose of schooling, it remains the most important as it raises the possibility that we can all live together peacefully and harmoniously. Democracy is the only way of living together which imagines this possibility for humankind. Democracy calls upon us, in Arendt's words, to love our children and the world, which means one another. This is where the going gets tougher!

Love

Arendtian love is not for the faint of heart. It is a multi-layered, often contradictory yet all encompassing intellectual, spiritual, and yes, even physical, lifelong embodied disposition or manifestation of the human ideal which we sometimes refer to as agape, or unconditional love. It is a public love, in that it is an open declaration available to all who care to listen, as in "it's good to be alive, I'm glad you're here too - I'm happy to share my world with you." It is a disposition reached through common sense writ large as in "we're all in this thing called living together, what affects one of us affects all of us, what's good for all of us is good for each of us." Hopelessly idealistic in practice, yes, but otherwise, would hardly be worthy of being called an idea, educational or democratic.

We have glimpses, however, of the possible in individuals like Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Václav Havel, Hannah Taylor and others too numerous to mention.

We have glimpses in nations and communities - Canada's apologies to our Aboriginal friends regarding our past ways, Africa's Truth and

Reconciliation Commissions, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness, in non-governmental organizations like the Greg Mortenson's Central Asia Institute building schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Stephen Lewis' grandmothers and HIV/AIDs Foundation and many more. These are manifestations of attempts at "love" and embodiments of love. If we can't love those who we are sharing the earth together with at the moment, we need merely imagine what it would be like with some arbitrary notion of a world without them, or their world without us. We can find ourselves liking not only the ideal of all others, but the potential for love they represent. And we can love our children again by preparing them to create new worlds. We are educators called upon to publicly declare our love for children and others, in other words for education and democracy.

In summary, education and democracy are fundamentally and inextricably linked to who we are, what we do and what we think is good. They rest upon judgments regarding the private and public lives of our young and ourselves. They demand of us a total commitment to ourselves, all others and the ideals themselves. We could do worse than adopt Elshstain's closing comments:

"We must be on guard. The task of the democratic political imagination is possible if the civility is not utterly destroyed, if room remains for playful experimentation from deep seriousness of purpose free from totalistic intrusion and ideological control. For even when equality and justice seem far-off ideals, freedom preserves the human discourse necessary to work toward the realization of both. One day as our children or their children or their children's children stroll in gardens, debate in public places, or poke through the ashes of a wrecked civilization, they may not rise to call us blessed. But neither will they curse our memory because we permitted democracy, through our silence, to pass away as in a dream" (1993:143).

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*Dr. John Wiens is the Dean of the Faculty
of Education, University of Manitoba, and
a former superintendent of Seven Oaks
School Division.*

jrwiens@ms.umanitoba.ca

March 2009



Manitoba Association of School Superintendents

375 Jefferson Ave, Winnipeg, Manitoba R2V 0N3

Tel: 204.487.7972 Fax: 204.487.7974

Email: coralie.bryant@7oaks.org