

Review

Can democratic education be universalized?

“I think therefore I am” vs. “I am because we are” Learner-centered vs. Community-centered Free Schools vs. Freedom Schools

Summary: This essay shows the historic roots of free schools and democratic schools are in the European philosophy of Romanticism and its emphasis on the freedom of the individual and the natural learning abilities of children. It situates these alternatives as mainly non-public schools which also reflect the dominant American culture of independence and individual achievement. It seeks to contrast these alternatives to other worldviews and cultures with which democratic education may wish to collaborate. In doing so, the reader is required to consider the African concept of Ubuntu, the ethos of freedom schools, and the contrast of positive and negative freedom. This will not only advance the development of private learning alternatives, but will advance the development of a desegregated and socio-economically diverse international movement of unconventional approaches to education which will help all students in all schools. In doing so, private and public learning alternatives are challenged to move beyond the emphasis on an individual student’s freedom to choose without interference, personal independence, and self-actualization to also include an ethos of social responsibility and universal inter-connectedness.

“Act only on the maxim whereby thou can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.
~ Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative

We can make schools tools of creating a better world. But, we have to redefine learning. Learning should always be in connection with the community. Nothing of what we learn is of value unless it is of value to the community by contributing to its perseverance and well-being. -- Dick de Groot on Ubuntu

“The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.”

~ bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*

“Unfortunately, the current educational reform movement has moved to a 'one-size-fits-all' model of teaching and testing; the argument and facts just presented indicate this approach is doomed to failure. Children of voluntary minority groups (groups other than the descendents of enslaved Africans) cannot succeed if what is most valued in school—individual achievement—is considered selfish egotism at home. Equally important, the 'one-size-fits-all' model loses sight of how alternative in-puts can enrich the dominant culture. For example, the U.S. ideal of the self-fulfilled individual can, at the extreme, lead to widespread isolation, alienation, and violence. Hence, an emphasis on family responsibility and solidarity, so intrinsic to collectivistic cultures, can impart a moderating influence on our society.”

~ Trumbull, Greenfield, & Quiroz (2003) p. 92

IDEC Online 2018/2019 Conference

February 8-9, 2019

<http://idec2018.online>

© 2019 johnharrisloflin@yahoo.com
Black & Latino Policy Institute

www.vorcreatex.com
Indianapolis, Indiana USA

Alternative Education: Its European roots and basis in individualism

Much of alternative education's roots can be traced to Romanticism, an 18th century philosophy opposed to the over-emphasis of rationality during the Age of Reason in Europe. Educationally, the Romantics favored freedom of the individual. They viewed human nature as basically good, energetic, and naturally inquisitive. Children should be taught with patience and understanding. Schools need not curb or discipline the natural tendencies of the child, but encourage the student to grow and blossom. Teachers were to appeal to the child's interests and discourage strict discipline and tiresome lessons. Love and sympathy were the guides, not rules and punishment. Teaching by example and direct experience were better for learning than books and lectures. The world should just simply be presented or made available to students. No force or threats were required.

Below is a review of philosophy, values, and moreover, the disposition of communities of color and other non-dominant groups compared to those same categories with respect to America's dominant culture.

	Characteristics of Dominant American Culture	Characteristics of Non-dominant American Culture
Social history	Individualism--emphasizes independence*	Collectivism--emphasizes inter-dependence
Worldview	Western—Anglo-Saxon Northern European	Non-western
Main orientation to	Objects	People
Relationships	Egalitarian	Hierarchical--respect for tradition & authority
Child-development	Primarily an individual matter (ala Piaget)—it happens in stages & is the same for everyone	Primarily a social matter--takes different paths depending on the goals of child rearing in a particular community
Parents define & place value on early cognitive development in terms of child's:	Knowledge of the physical world (defining/describing objects) & linguistic communication skills	Development of social intelligence—interpersonal relationships, responsibility for others, & cooperation
Conceptualizations of intelligence	An intelligent child is one who is aggressive and competitive	An intelligent child may be one who knows how to complete chores for family
Parental communications Emphasize	Distal modes of communication through linguistic means	Proximal modes of communication such as touching and holding
School's emphasis on developing each child's potential	Views this as normal & healthy for development	May perceive this as encouraging undesirable selfishness
Classroom learning style	Prefer to work alone—in some cases, asking for help is a sign of weakness	Prefer to work in groups & to "seek out class-mates & teachers for discussion, clarification, elaboration, & aid"

From “Cultural Values in Learning and Education” (Trumbull, Greenfield & Quiroz, 2003)

*A study by Geert Hofstede of 53 countries across 5 continents found the United States to be the most individualist country in the world along a continuum of individualism versus collectivism. (Kozulin.2003).

European perspective: The Cartesian method “*cogito ergo sum*”

In an attempt to understand his existence, 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes initially arrives at only a single principle: thought exists. Thinking is thus every activity of a person of which he/she is immediately conscious. Thought cannot be separated from the person, therefore, the person exists: I think, therefore I am. ”I think therefore I am” which requires no other person’s involvement. Here, the very act of asking if one exists, in itself, serves as proof of the reality of one’s own existence: I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am. Decartes’ first person perspective becomes the essence of the individualism of European thought and culture *Thus, learning concerns self discovery, self-development and fulfillment, self-reliance, and personal autonomy.*

African perspective: The ubuntu principle “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”

The “I think therefore I am” of Descartes is translated in Africa in: “I am because we are.” Holland’s Dick de Groot (2007) compared European and African worldviews in his essay, “The Ubuntu-way: A reversal of perspective: I am because we are.” According to de Groot, this is the African ubuntu (uu-BUUN-too) principle: a human being only becomes a human being through other human beings. We are who we are because we are seen, because the people around us respect and acknowledge us as a person.

These are profoundly different ways to view ourselves and each manifests in profoundly different education orientations.

de Groot explains learning the Ubuntu-way is through connection with the community. This is because nothing of what a person learns is of value unless it is of significance to the community, contributing to its perseverance and well-being. In “ubuntu” culture, the manner of greeting if you meet someone, you say: “Sawu bona,” which means: “I see you.” The return greeting is: “Sikhona” or “Here I am.” Ubuntu comes from a Zulu proverb: “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” or “a human being only becomes a human being through other human beings.” We exist because we are seen, because the people around us respect and acknowledge us as a person (de Groot, 2006).

Thus, learning should always be in connection with the community, because nothing of what we learn is of value unless it is of significance to the community. Everyone’s learning should contribute to the perseverance and well-being of the community. This is de Groot’s “**communal constructivism.**”

He points out ubuntu does not imply individuals do not matter. A community is composed of individuals with all having potential to develop themselves. The question is whether the community can benefit of all conceivable potentials of its members. As well, in ubuntu acquiring knowledge and skills individually is needed development, yet what really matters is inspiration, imagination, challenges, choice and responsibility--values only realized in the context of a community.

Five principles of ubuntu regarding education

1. Learning is a community process. Learning in schools is not confined to students only.
2. The community is characterized by diversity: we learn because we are different.
3. The community determines the direction of the communal learning process, because learning time is too valuable to develop all individual potentials undirected.
4. The members of the community are responsible for its organization. In schools this implies involving students at all levels of organization, according to their abilities. The school is a model community.
5. The members of the community utilize knowledge and skills of other communities and offer their own skills and knowledge to others in the awareness of ultimate global interdependency.

Freedom: What is it? Positive and negative freedom (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom>)

What is now obvious, freedom signifies different things to different people. Freedom has a different meaning to African Americans (the descendents of enslaved Africans) than to many European Americans; and, this does not make one idea of “freedom” more or less authentic than the other.

The important distinction here is between "freedom from" (negative freedom) and "freedom to" (positive freedom). For example, free schoolers want freedom from oppression or restraint--an absence of obstacles put in the way of action (especially by other people). It answers the question: What is the area within which a student is or should be left to do or be what he/she is able to do or be, without interference by other persons/governments? This group wants learning without compulsion. The students/staff have freedom and want to exercise it with little or no interference.

Free schools vs. Freedom schools

To advance the understanding of why collectivist views of freedom can act as a barrier to de-segregating the national movement of unconventional approaches to education, a review of the characteristics of America's freedom schools and free schools is needed.

Freedom schools were more community-centered; Free schools were more child-centered

The collectivist-oriented African American community was more concerned with what is best for a child as a member of a community, and not so much as what is best for a child as an individual (personal communication with Chris Mercogliano, June 3, 2007). Free/democrat students have freedom and want to exercise it without interference. In a liberatory education, students do not have enough freedom and seek ways to get it.

Encouraging individual achievement vs. children's sense of social affiliation and responsibility to others

As stated, AERO endorsed interpretations of education professed by private alternatives and particularly “a learner-centered approach in which students choose their daily activities” which enables independence, individual development, individual freedom, individual expression, and individual achievement can also be viewed as limited and detrimental to others.

Although these schools have a legacy of personal development and success, collectivist, as well as some individualist-oriented educators, are concerned that *encouraging children's individual achievements in school can stimulate an independent sense of self that undermines the child's social affiliation and responsibility for others* (Trumbull, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2003, p. 73).

Social actualization: A common good responsibility of private alternatives

That self-actualization manifests from the discovery and development of each student's uniqueness, Yaacov introduced the IDE concept of *social actualization*: 1) the ability to know the uniqueness of others--find and see that each person is different and unique; 2) the ability to know the culture of each person—find that which is beautiful and unique in each person's culture and seeing your culture is not the best; and, 3) the ability to make connections and enable cooperation between individual differences and individual cultures.

Is this the bridge between the child-centered theme of individual justice and the collectivist's concern for social justice?

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A review of the roots of free schools/democratic schools, and not all, but most of the actual free/democratic schools show they share an individualistic approach to education. The concern of this essay is on the limitations associated with this education philosophy. In addition, there is a concern that making available “many paths”--a variety of educational options to families/students--would lead to the balkanization of schools and threaten our larger responsibility to the common good of our global society.

See Dick de Groot's Ted Talk: “What happens when we empower schools through our communities?”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O343xIVKQzw>