Schooling Stories: Three Paths, Two Tragedies, One Vision

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The narratives and recurrent imagery of educational policy discourse—those exemplary stories that describe and advise and dominant symbols that signal and shape—have an ambivalent status in educational policy. On the one hand, the concept tale in policy analysis is usually employed invidiously with the assumption that the "rational analyst" is beyond needing such a construct, but is aware that particular tales are "at work" to perpetuate certain values, perspectives, and practices. On the other hand, all participants in policy communities tell stories (Skoldberg, 1994; Kahne, 1996). From Plato's advice in the Republic (625)—e.g., "... we should do our utmost that the first stories that they hear should be so composed as to bring the fairest lessons of virtue to their ears"—to William Bennett's current preferred examples in The Book of Virtues (1993), educational stories, we are told, are important. All of us, moreover, can tell schooling stories that are at once personal and shared in our culture and politics. Finally, the participants in formal schooling are actively involved in storytelling—stories are the essence of educational philosophies, curriculum, pedagogy, and public policy discourse.

Our educational tales are predominantly cast in journey terms with metaphoric paths with distinctive features leading to desired destinations. This idea resonates across many cultures. For us in the West, our formal educational journeys are rooted in the word "curriculum," which means running a course, often one complete with hurdles. A pathway for learning (a route already mapped for us but one we must take ourselves) seems especially apt as we metaphorically travel through internal (personal) and external (social/historical) landscapes. "In traveling a Pathway we make stops, encounter and overcome obstacles, recognize and interpret signs, seek answers, and follow the tracks of those that have something to teach us" (Cajete, 1994: 55).

Three Paths, Two Tragedies, One Vision

In this chapter we identify three clusters of educational explanations, descriptions, and prescriptions that present distinctive but interrelated paths and their associated tales of direction and destination. We map and interpret these three educational policy paths on a "philosophical grid," point to each path's pedagogical emphases, and suggest some distinctive features of their associated politics. Philosophy itself comes from reflection on and refinement of the tales, metatales, and archetypes that form stories. Educational stories evolve and are consciously constructed to answer perennial philosophical questions about reality, social order, knowing, and meaning. In U.S. public policy, education is mythologized as the great equalizer of persons and as a main route to a democratic society. Our stories promise opportunities for both individual fulfillment and social participation. Essentialism, progressivism, and holism become alternative but connected educational pathways with exemplary tales employed to realize these ambitions.

Essentialism (Plato, 1961; Russell, 1926; Adler, 1982; Hirsch, 1987) and progressivism (Rousseau, 1911; Dewey, 1916; Brameld, 1956; Freire, 1973; Weiler, 1988) dominate current educational policy and associated political conversation. The essentialist and progressive educational forms are described in tales of individual struggle for personal fulfillment and social democracy. These tales become tragic as educational paths are blocked or fail to lead either to personal fulfillment or to a vibrant democracy. Despite sincere intentions and efforts, inevitable flaws result in, at best, partial successes. The tales may include some declarative elements that are "romantic exceptions" in which the good should and, on rare and heroically effortful occasions, does triumph over significant challenges. There are even a few (dark) comic moments of parody and satire in the exemplary tales, but the dominant resolution remains personally and socially tragic. Our educational ambitions are not met; we are neither personally nor democratically fulfilled.

The third educational path with its distinctive stories, here called holism (Krishnamurti, 1953; Bopp, et al., 1989; Miller, 1992; Bowers, 1993), is much less coherent than the essentialist and progressive forms. We explore it to clarify its defining visionary characteristics in hopes of moving beyond the propensity for tragic resolutions of educational policy. We do not believe educational policy tragedy is inevitable. It is possible to develop tales strategically and encourage recurring images that provide a new political vision and policy imagination for education. Holism offers a third path, connected to the other two, but branching out with inspirational/adventure tales that provide a vision of escape from tragic resolution by transforming conceptions of personal fulfillment and democracy (while working...
toward their realization) within a global/planetary context of sustainability (a challenge not foreseen by those who plotted the essentialist and progressive tales).

Essentialism

"Eddie Thompson is now a judge."

She said that aloud even though she was completely alone in her office. Her computer had been on screen saver for a long time, but she was staring intently at it as if it were a cloudy window.

"Judge Thompson has become one of our star graduates," she mused. When he was in school and she was a Master Teacher, the District had been known statewide for its academic excellence. But it had declined in recent years as it struggled with a changing population, a city in transition, new program initiatives, and all sorts of state mandates. A lukewarm state assessment last year had in fact become a core issue in the recent school board election and the victories of two new members who had promised "reform."

She was troubled as she continued to stare at the screen. While she was mindful of her rather precarious position as the district's first female superintendent, she found herself feeling the most concern for the prospects of her own children. Rachel was just starting middle school and Nathan was a junior at one of the high schools. It had been a long time since the voters had approved a school bond issue and the state was barely staying even with inflation in its share of the budget. The buildings were sliding toward disrepair. There wasn't enough money for all the requests. Staff morale was on the edge.

She was troubled but not confused. Eddie Thompson, an African American from a poor inner-city family, had made it. Now he was a judge. He had gotten into a good college and had gone on to a law career in large part because these schools had equipped him to compete. The school board election was over and so was her ambivalence. There had been enough problem-bashing, hand-wringing, and passion about everyone's favorite code words, from "multiculturalism" to "creationism." She knew what programs and what directions were needed. Eddie Thompson signaled the need for basic, focused, well-disciplined instruction. Advanced literacy, cultural knowledge, critical thinking, and competence in science and mathematics were what prepared students for this competitive world.

In the silence of her office she could hear voices of opposition. One she could almost see in her darkened computer screen, the Master Teacher from Nathan's high school. He, who was also on the union negotiating team, would talk eloquently of elitism, of freezing the teachers out of participating in policy making, and of dividing students by narrowing recognized achievement to a short list of criteria. The drop-out rate would increase, he would predict, because many students would not be supported by either their situation or their families. They would not be motivated by suffer academic demands, and they would just leave school, become lost to society, or perhaps worse, fall into drugs and crime. The Master Teacher was very persuasive at these meetings and he was really good in the classroom. But his educational progressivism was demonstrably flawed in principle and practice.

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Years ago, this district had not been hesitant about academic excellence, in advocating the highest forms of integrity, or in recognizing the best knowledge and the best learning. Seasoned teachers should be listened to, but it was the elected school board members and the superintendent they selected who were responsible for setting school policies, shaping the organization, and prescribing the curriculum. Meeting tough standards for learning things that really mattered was what got Eddie Thompson to the bench, not having teachers and students participating in well-meaning diversions. Trying to get the current Eddie Thompsons to feel included by lowering academic standards, by caving in to popular culture, by offering electives that encouraged avoidance of basic learning that was essential, and by not insisting on the highest levels of learning and character, all had contributed to this familiar crisis.

The state assessment was painful for her, but it had been mostly accurate. She could see the faces of the school board in her computer screen. She could hear their voices in her quiet office. They would quickly agree with the direction she would propose to them tomorrow. They would join her in challenging the drift away from what was essential and in moving toward teaching what all of them knew to be right. They knew Eddie Thompson, too. They knew what had gotten him onto his achievement track and now he is a judge.

Essentialism: Rooted in tales told about the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution, and elaborated in response to late-nineteenth-century growth and diversification, public education's philosophy and policy became centered by the efforts to provide universal access to a common literacy, a common core of knowledge, and common values applicable across time and cultures (Spring, 1994).

The essentialists depict the educational journey as largely an individual quest for distinctive excellence through which one accumulates the knowledge base and cognitive abilities necessary to live a productive life. The individual learner's progress is acknowledged and rewarded by achieving and maintaining position in competitive intellectual, social, and economic hierarchies. It was the hope of the common schools movement that by mandating mass, public education, the path toward personal and material fulfillment would be open to all individuals, regardless of their social position. Public schooling, through teachers as primary agents, would assume the role of guiding individuals along a narrow but clearly defined path by holding learners accountable to universally held standards of excellence. The teacher, as trusted authority, would skillfully lead learners to humanity's highest thoughts (e.g., Socratic method) and to the most useful tools for shaping the world around them (e.g., scientific reasoning). As all would be offered the same invitation to excel, manifest differences in needs, abilities, and interests would be understood and accepted as differences in personal motivation, effort, and merit. As all would follow a singular, upward path toward shared goals, learners would experience a sense of solidarity and
scores, narrow and specialize the curriculum, increase school discipline, and enhance student and teacher performance through even more strenuous competition and top-down control.

"Twenty years of struggle for another meeting like that?" He had worked hard and smart, mobilizing scarce resources, creating alliances, and attacking the "system" in many places. His first teaching position was at Central—the largest, toughest, most traditional school in the district. That was where he wanted to be, where his idealism and energy were most needed. He had risen quickly through the ranks of the union, had become influential on the endless curriculum development committees, and had been a vigorous worker on several school board campaigns. He had become visible in the whole district as a student advocate, an active colleague for his fellow teachers, and a major thorn in the side for the administration. His friends often referred to him as tireless and heroic. His opponents saw him as preachy and disrespectful. He reflected again on what he saw as his few successes outside his own classrooms, beyond the walls of his own school. Most of his efforts had been blocked, not by principled argument, public debate, or systematic analysis, but instead dissipated by a thoughtless school bureaucracy and ignored by an out-of-touch school board.

He was tired, deeply tired, of trying to extend progressive programs beyond his classroom and small circle of like-minded colleagues. Now it was taking most of his attention just to focus on his own students in this school, in this difficult neighborhood, and on the daunting challenges these students faced. The evening's anger was ebbing as he promised himself again to withdraw from his union activities, quit going to school board meetings, and commit his efforts fully to his students in his classroom. He knew he made a difference there. The union was negotiating around the edges of conditions of work—important maybe, but not central to these kids' needs. The school board wasn't listening—the administration couldn't listen! The classroom was the best he could do.

Progressivism: Progressive educators also pursue universal access to personal fulfillment, but turn their path toward overt equity goals. Knowledge is still acquired largely through personal effort and merit, but now with the goal of acquisition redirected from mainly personal gain toward granting voice and influence to the disadvantaged. Knowledge is explicitly acknowledged as power. Learners are encouraged to accumulate knowledge so they can increase their power to advocate for themselves and for others who share their concerns and interests (Dewey, 1916; Shor, 1992). The teacher, as broker, gathers and guides the learner through multiple resources and varied experiences so that students might join together in the social construction of knowledge that is valued based upon its relevance and utility for specific persons in specific communities (e.g., the project method, Kilpatrick, 1921). The definition of valued knowledge is thus expanded beyond the narrower cognitive conceptions that became standardized along the essentialist path to assert value for the emotional aspects of identity and the reality of education as an explicitly political project.
Education remains largely an individual journey but one that leads to broadened self-identities and community responsibilities. Broadened identities are achieved through greater cultural integration and community participation, in flatter educational hierarchies, with interchange of teacher and learner roles. Classrooms are to extend into community life. Communities are called upon to restructure patterns of social and economic privilege to guarantee movement from goals of equal access toward goals of equal power, participation, and performance for all learners in public educational systems. Equal opportunity to pursue personal fulfillment and economic security is to be supported by equitable school financing. Democracy is to be advanced by teaching advocacy skills and by developing strong school-community partnerships.

Struggling to move from present inequities toward a more egalitarian future, pervasive and abstract systems of social exploitation are identified and demystified so that individuals need no longer attribute their positions of disadvantage primarily to personal inadequacies. Personal identity is defined in relation to oppositional oppressor/oppressed categories as a means of first clarifying the causes and dynamics of social injustice and then motivating principled social action to alleviate it (Freire, 1973).

It is here that a second tragedy begins to unfold as hopes for progress are raised but not fulfilled despite intense efforts expended. Although progressivism provides significant insight into the nature of the gap between the haves and have-nots, the feasibility of its proposed strategies to bridge the gap and to improve the quality of social relationships is deeply problematic. In an increasingly complex and troubled world, is it possible to sustain dialogue and to work together constructively across difference merely when the oppressor and the oppressed are made fully aware of the implications of their positions for their own lives and the lives of those they love (Narayan, 1988)? Is it possible to redistribute valued resources (wealth, status, power, opportunity) on a large scale, or to expand the resource base to bring all up to the quality of life experienced by those who are now socially and economically stable and secure? Though deep in the heart of every progressive lives the hope that with sufficient commitment and skill such questions can be answered “yes!” years of valiant but failed attempts have proved otherwise.

Progressivism remains ambivalent on individual achievement while defining democratic participation as pursuit of an agenda of personal gain or commitment to advancing the cause of an organized interest/identity group. Social concerns constructed out of personal and interest group agendas are then addressed at the risk of a failure to build common values and community. Building advantageous coalitions grows more difficult, policy imagination is diminished, and political tragedy interweaves with classroom discouragement. Universal access to an educational system driven by individual and special interest group advocacy does not result in uni-

versal access to self-fulfillment and deepened democratic participation (Lowl, 1969; Barber, 1992, 1996; Sandell, 1996).

Progressives cannot easily adopt common essentialist responses to an increasingly obvious educational tragedy by giving up (passively accepting privilege) or by adopting a cynical nostalgia (attempts to return to a golden age). Some progressives retreat to niches of control (e.g., a grant-funded program, a charter school, an innovative classroom) and try harder. There is passion that grows out of continued failure and an admirable willingness to persist in the face of unbeatable odds. Such educators and policy advocates become portrayed by themselves and others as perpetual burnout victims. They risk drifting toward lower expectations for themselves, their students, and their society. They increasingly settle for exceptional “romantic” moments of success and learn to thrive on failure-driven passions without a broader, inspiring, and sustaining tale.

The intertwined paths of essentialism and progressivism that are our current educational policy lead to nonsustainable material and cultural expectations in an increasingly fractured social order (Bowers, 1987). By continuing to follow these paths we set ourselves up for either apathy and cynicism or repetitive and debilitating experiences of failure. Deep tragedy is the inescapable resolution of these dominant educational tales.

Holism

Suddenly things snap into focus.
I've been pursuing unity all my life,
But could only glimpse the monstrous vision in fragments;
It has haunted me for years.

Each time I sighted it, I struggled to make it concrete.
At first, it seemed I only had a sculptor's yard of unfinished figures
Then it slowly began to make sense,
Gathered from glimpses and inferences.

More and more, this mysterious life comes together.
It may take years more to reveal the whole.
That's all right.
I'm prepared to go the distance.

Holism: In this short poetic meditation, Deng Ming-Dao (1992: 346) offers a fleeting glimpse of the unique form of storytelling embraced by educational holists across time and cultures, that of the inspirational adventure tale. Such tales are told to focus our attention on the most intense and significant learning experiences of our lives—those times when we deeply know and, in response, are deeply changed.
While not new, holism remains an unclear, promissory path aspiring to reconstruct the American educational metonym to enrich the objectives of personal fulfillment and social democracy while adding considerations for sustainability. Part of the holists' political difficulty is a strategic attempt to avoid sharp debate and direct conflict with travelers and maintainers on the other paths. Thus, a major challenge for holism is to define itself positively and integratively—to attempt to incorporate the best of what other perspectives have to offer rather than defining itself in opposition to their inadequacies. Perhaps an even tougher problem for holists is the tendency for opponents to dismiss them as fuzzy-minded, romantic, and fundamentally naïve in their refusal to engage in "intellectual criticism wars" or the common forms of "educational politics as usual." To avoid becoming a third failed educational path, holists must evolve a deliberately integrated approach to philosophy, pedagogy, and policy—an effort of imagination that transcends conventional categories and "politics as usual." They must write a plausible adventure tale.

This will be a tale of knowing. What does it mean to deeply know? For holists, deep knowing is essentially relational; it occurs within a context of connections that are close, personal, intensive, gracious, compassionate, just, enduring, mutually beneficial; relationships that are, in a word, intimate. Holists struggle to support the development of intimate relationships across multiple dimensions of learning: intrapersonal learning (relational experiences promoting full development and integration of mind/heart/body/spirit); interpersonal learning (experiencing intimacy on a person-to-person basis, building connections that build community); and transpersonal learning (connecting in life-affirming ways with nonhuman entities and broader social and physical systems and forces).

As each individual is fundamentally connected to the whole of humanity and nonhuman nature, deep knowing is at once intensely personal and fundamentally communal (Bowers, 1993). Personal transformation occurs in communion (i.e., connection, communication, resonance, and harmony) with broader social and biophysical worlds and is then radiated through intricate webs of relationship. Its effects are strengthened and enhanced when communion is created across dimensions of difference. Life is sustained, not when interaction across difference is merely tolerated or actively restricted, but when those possessing unique and distinctive attributes interact and evolve together. Individual, societal, and biophysical diversity is cherished and protected because it provides opportunities for creative synthesis and renewal. Thus it is through efforts to initiate and sustain intimate, diverse, and multidimensional relationships that deep knowing and deep change occur.

Holists reach beyond the essentialist and progressivist paths as they struggle to develop and integrate a spiritual dimension along with the intellectual, emotional, moral, and political dimensions of learning and life. Within a holistic context, spirituality is described and experienced as the inspirational "kaleidoscopic" moment at which understandings that have beckoned yet eluded one suddenly "snap into focus." Though extremely difficult to capture in words, such moments are characterized by an intense and elegant integration of insight, sensation, and emotion. Valued knowledge, in a spiritual context, is received as a gift (Kurth-Schai, 1992). It is not earned and acquired through individual effort or merit, but instead is bestowed as a blessing, and thus received with feelings of elation, surprise, wholeness, and humility. The inspirational quality of such moments is further enhanced by the simultaneous experience of deep mystery—the complex interplay of doubt, fear, and wonder that challenges our deeply held illusions of control and certainty and compels us to abandon these. Herein lies the centrality of the spiritual element of holist tales, for only if we are "haunted" by "monstrous" and beautiful visions; only if we are driven by intense joy, curiosity, and uncertainty can great risk taking and adventure, can deep learning, take place.

Holists' key themes—intimacy, inspiration, spirituality, resonance, communion, risk, mystery, and adventure—are strange ones to introduce into educational policy conversations. But their political implications include a nonoppositional style with emphasis less on rhetorical claims and more on successful holistic performances. A holistic educational policy turn implies stories that will emerge through attempts to imagine and act upon three interrelated transformations: one intellectual, one technological, and one political.

(1) A transformed conception of teaching/learning: If sustainable self, societal, and environmental identities and interactions are the objectives, the conceptual transition from treating knowledge as commodity to understanding knowledge as gift must be accomplished. Knowledge is a gift to be received, developed, and shared by all. Its gift quality is a function of its ability to develop and sustain intimate relationships through its exchange. In this view, learning involves deriving personal meaning from intense, complex, and multidimensional experience; determining how the gifts of knowledge received or constructed might be made accessible and beneficial to others; and remaining continually open to new insight gained through participation in varied and diverse relationships. It is through full engagement in these processes that each individual's identity as a uniquely gifted self can emerge. Holism introduces into educational policy discourse a conception of excellence that is inclusionary, diversified, and defined within the context of significant social relationships; one that values self-development and self-expression balanced with sensitivity and creativity in response to the needs and contributions of others.
Specific challenges include helping all participants (students, teachers, administrators, policy actors) whose educational experiences have emphasized competition to regain the levels of confidence, trust, and respect necessary for constructing knowledge in collaboration with others; to develop imaginative approaches to advocacy and conflict resolution that are not defined, motivated, and ultimately defeated by oppositional category traps; and to develop new ways to organize resources and assess the quality of educational interactions and outcomes. Overall, processes of teaching and learning centered on gifts defy passivity and uniformity, and challenge current conceptions of predictability and control.

(2) A transformed conception of the nature and role of technology: The industrial assembly line (long-serial technologies) model for essentialist public education rolled-off standardized "products" for what was understood as its labor and consumer markets. Progressivism became shaped largely as a mediating technology in which schools and teachers tried to broker among groups (of knowledge makers and users) and build communities—not just assemble status-ready individuals. Holistic technologies, in closer harmony with human and nonhuman natures, are possible and necessary in order to transform education. This type of technology is based on expanding conceptions of information (not just instrumental data), is informed by a more diverse understanding of human learning (not only narrow cost/benefit problem-solving), and must be responsible to human and nonhuman constituents (not just to existing dominant hierarchies). Such "open reflective systems" will require transformed philosophies, pedagogies, and policies. Technologies of the material are one of the distinguishing achievements of our present culture and metaphors in our policy stories. Technologies of the spirit are a new requirement for the holistic educational vision and a challenge to our collective imaginations.

(3) A transformed politics: Educational systems that include both conventional competitions and gift exchanges are imaginable, inspiring, and impera-
tive. Public policies for what is needed (sustainable self-fulfillment and social democracy), but not yet well understood or supported, require a politics that reduces the contingent either/or oppositions, and is broadly accessible and accountable. To the politics of essentialism, holism can add more diverse, inclusive, and lofier goals than the quest for private virtue and the privileges of personal economic success. For progressives, holism can add inspiration to familiar interests and communion to fragile coalitions. The politics for this requires openness, creativity, and courage with a political imagination broadly defined, expressed, and experienced; with participation broadly understood and practiced in all parts of life; with coalitions becoming broader, deeper, and understood as intrinsically dynamic; with operating conceptions of power becoming multipolar and multiparadigmatic; and with an expanded sense of political time (beyond short-term budget and election cycles).

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In their politics of schooling, holists do not reject the visions and achievements of essentialism and progressivism, but try to understand these intertwined tragedies in order to move in ways that incorporate the best of their aspirations. Holists give us "glimpses and inferences" of an inspiring destination, a fragmentary sketch of an adventurous and risky path, and a vision that is at once educational and political. By valuing a broader range of knowledge (cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and political) and by inventing deeper learning situations (diverse pedagogies and flexible technologies situated in many places) public education can be shaped by successful holistic performances. Policy analysts and evaluators can take such holistic opportunities to broaden and deepen their criteria and methodologies. All of us could take these challenges to become adept in less oppositional, more inclusive, and situationally imaginative political conversations.

Conclusion

The politics of schooling require new tales and reinterpreted myths to inspire and renew travelers for their adventuresome journey along the familiar paths of essentialism and progressivism and especially as they join the new path of educational holism. Perhaps constructing an intelligible holistic educational inspirational/adventure tale and reshaping our social myths will not be such an extensive challenge. Gregory Cajete reminds us that "Our lives are expressions of the myths we live by and that live through us," and challenges us to begin "the process of living a mythically literate life." That is: "to live life with conscious reference to more than day-to-day concerns . . . and to live a life of cultivated relationships with significant people, practices, institutions, and the world, based on guidance from inner and creative sources" (1994: 118). From such collaborative and creative efforts, new narratives will emerge, new paths will be explored, and new schooling stories will be told to reflect and guide public educational policy.