

Reflections on the Education of an Emeritus Professor

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The African proverb tells us that it takes a whole village to raise a child; but in the case of university professors—at least for those in the social sciences—it takes the whole world. Those working in the natural sciences may succeed cloistered in laboratories on university campuses; but the social scientists' laboratories are the family, the school or other organizations, the community, the state, the nation, the world. Nevertheless, a university environment provides an excellent base for forays into the world for studying social phenomena. The University at Buffalo is no exception.

I began my sojourn as a UB faculty member in July of 1963 at the age of 33, married and with two children ages three and five. I had completed my doctorate at Columbia University's Teachers College (TC) in 1960 and remained there for three more years as a research associate with the Institute for Administrative Research, where I had been a graduate assistant during my doctoral study years. UB's School of Education was interested in me for the knowledge and experience I had gained at TC in the area of financing public schools¹. My initial faculty assignments at UB were within the educational administration program as the school finance specialist and within the program's affiliate, the Western New York Educational Service Council (WNYESC), where I was the director of its school finance and legislation program for a number of years and the council's executive secretary from 1965 through 1967.

The 1960s was a volatile time when the national political and educational climates were rapidly changing. Dr. Martin Luther King effectively raised the consciousness of the nation about the dire effects of racial and ethnic discrimination. The dual school system of the South was slowly being dismantled following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954 that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." In the North, de facto segregation along racial lines of school districts was also being challenged successfully (including Buffalo's in 1976). President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November of 1963 and shortly after his death Congress passed the Civil Rights Act which he had championed. President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty began in 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) became law in 1965. In 1966, the study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, was published. Authorized by the 1963 Civil Rights Act, it clearly documented the achievement and resource gaps experienced by minority children in public schools. Dr. King was assassinated in April of 1968 as he pursued his dream of a person being judged by the content of one's character rather than the color of one's skin. Robert Kennedy, President Kennedy's brother, was assassinated two months later while in pursuit of the Democratic Party's nomination for president.

The winds of change were whipping throughout the land, marked by demonstrations, riots, and bloodshed. The public schools became (and have remained) a center of concern and conflict. New questions were being asked. While my doctoral studies at TC had provided me with strong research skills and an understanding of the status quo at that time, I was not fully prepared to investigate the new issues being raised by those

challenging that status quo. A personal, life-long reeducation coincided with my arrival at UB that utilized resources and opportunities available through the university, the local community, the state and federal governments, foreign countries, and international agencies.

The University. To be perfectly honest, in 1963, the university was not particularly well equipped to address the new issues either. There was very little expertise among the faculty on the issues raised and few doing research to address them. There was not much ethnic diversity among faculty and students, either.

All of that has greatly changed. A major incentive to change was the federal funding of supporting research and training programs. Particularly helpful to me in the early years were funds made available through Titles III and IV of the ESEA. An important channel of access to these funds for the faculty of the School of Education was Project Innovation, which was administered (1966–1990) by the WNYESC for a coalition of school districts in the Niagara region. Activities supported included evaluation studies, teacher training, curriculum development, population projections, financial analyses, and legal studies related to school segregation and integration².

Federal and state funded programs were also helpful in bringing diversity to the student body. As for the faculty, improving diversity became a criterion in making new hires. This, coupled with the redirected interests of the existing faculty, created a dynamic intellectual environment for addressing the new national agenda.

The Community. Federal funded projects and independent consultancies gave me as much access to schools as I could handle. But, as a specialist in school finance, I was also interested in the process by which schools acquired resources, as well as how they used them. Being “public” schools, virtually all resources were provided by governments and governments make decisions through political processes. At the time, this was not an area typically funded by government or foundations. So I became an “advocate” and a “participant observer” of political events in Erie County.

In 1963, blacks (as were other minorities, but they represented a much smaller portion of the population than they do today) were grossly under-represented—if represented at all—on the Buffalo school board, Buffalo Common Council, Erie County Legislature and other area committees, commissions, and councils. I became active in an ad hoc, racially integrated group that sought funding to bring Saul Alinski to Buffalo to organize the black community into an effective political force to compete successfully for proper representation within the instruments of local government. Alinski, who was white, had a record of success in organizing minority communities in large cities throughout the country, beginning in his native Chicago. The end result was the formation of a political action organization on the east side of Buffalo in 1967, BUILD (Build, Unity, Independence, Liberty, and Dignity). BUILD did succeed in developing strong and sophisticated political voices for the black community that led to much better representation on the aforementioned agencies. Within a few years, BUILD’s mission had been accomplished and it was dissolved. The only remaining visible symbol of the organization is the BUILD Academy Public School.

The whites in the fund raising group formally organized as an advocacy group known as CAUSE (Coalition for Action and Unity for Social Equality), which worked with BUILD and other like-minded groups for urban-suburban integration of schools (which never happened) and for legislation to make discrimination in housing and employment illegal (which did happen).

My experience with CAUSE's failed efforts to bring about voluntary integration of minority children into the schools of Buffalo's affluent suburbs made me realize that the problem of inequitable wealth distribution was due in large part to the governance structure of public education, i.e., small school districts within large metropolitan areas. Unlike in the nineteenth century, when Horace Mann envisioned the "common school" as embracing children of all social groups, by mid-twentieth century, core cities had spilled out of their political boundaries into surrounding areas served by a variety of village, town, and school district governments. It was the affluent that tended to move outward, leaving mostly poor people to populate the aging housing of the core cities. School district populations were no longer comprehensive with respect to affluence and ethnicity. The haves had it and no longer needed to share their wealth with the have-nots at the local level. The "common school" had transitioned into highly segregated "neighborhood schools."

Battered and bewildered, I needed time to reassess my premises. Even social scientists need to spend some time for reflection in "ivory towers." A Post-Doctoral Fellowship in educational research awarded in 1969 by the United States Office of Education (the predecessor of the Department of Education) permitted me to do this at Stanford University's School of Education. At Stanford, I immersed myself in the literature analyzing the tensions created between political forces seeking to maximize social equity by centralizing power and authority in government, and those seeking to maximize personal freedom and efficiency through keeping power and authority decentralized in the hands of individuals, allowing issues of supply and demand to be arbitrated through free markets. The problem of developing a governance structure for education that recognized the legitimate societal concerns for equity, the professional concerns of teachers, the welfare concerns of parents for their children, and the efficiency concerns of taxpayers, pursued me the rest of my professional career³.

The World. In order to study alternative governance models and educational delivery systems different from the dominant American model, it was necessary to go abroad. Four sabbatical leaves were devoted to studying these forces. In 1979 and 1993, I was a visiting scholar at the University of London. England's educational commitment was a function of national government which financed the enterprise but allowed school heads extraordinary authority over matters of organization, staffing, and curriculum. This permitted operational diversity and family choice of schools with horizontal equity in the distribution of financial resources⁴. In 1986 and 1999, I was a visiting scholar at the University of Melbourne in Australia. The primary authority for providing educational services in Australia lies with the states which function as unitary school districts with some federal assistance, a model of strong centralization. In 1986, the states were beginning to recognize the limitations of centralization. In order to improve academic

effectiveness while preserving the equity benefits of the centralized system, states were experimenting with devolving to schools many of the operational functions traditionally provided by their Ministries of Education. By the time of my sabbatical leave in 1999, the State of Victoria, Melbourne being the capital city, had developed school governance and operational and support systems which are the most sophisticated and effective I have seen. The state continued to fully finance the system and to set and monitor academic standards; but, devolved to schools most other functions (similar to charter schools in the United States, today), and allowed parents freedom of choice of schools for their children⁵. My 1986 visit was supported by a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award and a Visiting Research Fellowship awarded by the University of Melbourne.

Shorter professional visits to other countries permitted me to observe these forces within other governance, management, and delivery systems. Included were Nigeria, China⁶, Israel, and Egypt⁷.

Learning. Today, we know much more about how to close the achievement gaps among children of varying ethnic and socioeconomic groups than we currently use; the issue is, can we muster the political will to implement what we know. The barriers to fundamental school reform are related more closely to politics and changing school structures and cultures than to economics.

A number of working models of successful schools exist and, interestingly, they don't cost more than what is already being spent in the United States with the exception of extending the school year. They do, however, require significant changes in how we staff and organize schools and remunerate personnel, which would require changes in collective bargaining contracts that limit the flexibility of schools in using their allocated financial resources.

Progress is being made at state and national levels on identifying achievement standards and in measuring progress by individual students and groups of students toward meeting them. Linking these data with local information systems in a manner useful to classroom instruction is still in the future.

School districts in the United States, the primary cause of unnecessary variation in per pupil expenditures, have become obsolete. Most of their authority, except for taxation, would be better placed with school governing boards. Financing of schools should be the responsibility of the state and federal governments⁸. The regional service functions provided by Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) can still be useful. Parents should be endowed with the right to select the school they deem best suited for each of their children.

School reforms in the world's major developed countries are closing in on similar patterns. In the quest for equitable achievement outcomes, uniform academic standards are being developed and monitored at the state and national levels, and provision of financial resources is becoming the responsibility of national and/or state governments. In search of liberty and efficiency, much discretion is being allowed schools in organizing and delivering their instructional programs for meeting national/state standards, and

parents are being encouraged to select the schooling options they deem best for their children. Ideas from the political right and the political left are coalescing near the center⁹.

Endnotes

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