

## **CHILDREN'S MIRACLE NEEDED TO SOLVE SCHOOL CRISIS**

By Grace Lee Boggs

Thirty years ago, in the fall of 1969, after having taught in the Detroit Public Schools and having also been deeply involved in the struggle for community control of schools as part of the Black Power movement in Detroit, I made a speech on education which has been widely reprinted in books and magazines, including a 1974 Harvard Educational Review monograph. It was also published in pamphlet form as Education to Govern, which went through three printings.

In that speech I warned that the youth rebellions breaking out all over the country were challenging us to go beyond community control of schools and begin grappling with fundamental questions about the purpose of education and how children learn. The purpose of education cannot be only to increase the earning power of the individual or to supply workers for the ever-changing slots of the corporate machine. Children, I said, need to be given a sense of the „unique capacity of human beings to shape and create reality in accordance with conscious purposes and plans. Learning, I said, must be related to the daily lives of children and must engage the hand and heart as well as the head. Especially in this age of rapid social and technical change, „t is not something you can make people do in their heads with the perspective that years from now, eventually, they will be able to get a good job and make a lot of money. Some children may accept this regimen. But those who feel most acutely the contradiction between the hopelessness of their daily lives and the abstractness of school „subjects will create so much turmoil inside and outside the school that teachers can,t teach and no one can learn.

That is why, I said, our schools must be transformed to provide children with ongoing opportunities to exercise „their resourcefulness to solve the real problems of their communities; working together rather than competitively, with younger children emulating older ones and older children teaching younger ones; experiencing the intrinsic consequences of their own actions. Children will be motivated to learn because their hearts, hands and heads are engaged in improving their daily lives.

Since 1969 our neighborhoods in cities like Detroit and Philadelphia have deteriorated far beyond anything that I could possibly have imagined. There once was a time when young people could drop out of school in the ninth grade and get a job in the factory making enough money to get married and raise a family. But as global corporations have been exporting jobs overseas, school dropouts have become participants in a drug economy which has turned our communities into war zones where we live behind barred windows and triple-locked doors. Metal detectors and security guards may be able to keep guns and knives out of school buildings, but they cannot keep the chaos in our communities and in the lives of our children out of our classrooms.

In cities all over the country politicians are now trying to resolve this crisis by competing with one another to hire more efficient school superintendents and administrators and by stricter and more frequent testing.

Their mindset is that of controllers and enforcers. A lot of parents have gone along because they see no alternative. Their hope is that the enforcers will at least provide an orderly school environment so that their children can get a quality education, by which they mean the kind of education that will enable them to get a good job in the corporate structure and escape from our deteriorating neighborhoods. But as the chaos spreads, an increasing number of these parents are sending their children to charter and private schools, thus guaranteeing that those left behind will be little better than prisoners and their teachers little better than wardens.

That is why it has become so urgent that we rethink how children learn and the purpose of education. We can no longer evade the reality that the average curriculum disempowers children by stifling their natural tendencies to explore, construct and create. We can no longer ignore the pain that teachers are suffering because this dysfunctional system is robbing them of their skills and vocations as teachers, turning them into controllers, managers and test-givers.

We are not going to solve this crisis with more money or more computers or new buildings. To achieve the miracle that is now needed to transform our schools into places of learning, we need to tap into the creative energies of our children and our teachers. In this connection we have much to learn from the struggle in Birmingham, Alabama, at the height of the civil rights movement. In the spring of 1963 the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by Martin Luther King Jr. launched a „fill the jails campaign to desegregate downtown department stores and schools in Birmingham. But few local blacks were coming forward as volunteers. Black adults were afraid of losing their jobs, local black preachers were reluctant to accept the leadership of an outsider, and city police commissioner Bull Connor had everyone intimidated. Even King,s nine days in jail failed to inspire local leaders to join the struggle. In fact, his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, which would later become famous, was virtually ignored by the press at the time. Facing a major defeat, King was persuaded by SCLC aide, James Bevel, to allow any child old enough to belong to a church to march. So on D-Day May 2, before the eyes of the whole nation, thousands of school children, many of them first graders, joined the movement and were beaten, fire-hosed, attacked by police dogs and herded off to jail in paddy wagons and school buses by Bull Connor,s men.

The result was what has been called “The Children,s Miracle.” Inspired and shamed into action, thousands of adults rushed to join the movement, some parents accompanying their children to jail. All over the country rallies were called to express outrage against Bull Connor,s brutality. Locally the power structure was forced to desegregate lunch counters and dressing rooms in downtown stores, hire blacks to work downtown and begin desegregating the schools. Nationally the Kennedy administration, which had been trying not to alienate white Dixiecrat voters, was forced to begin drafting civil rights legislation as the only way to forestall more Birmingham.

In 1963 the main struggle was for desegregation. Today it is to rebuild our schools and our communities.

What we need to do now is to begin engaging our children in Community-building activities with the same audacity with which the civil rights movement engaged them in desegregation activities thirty-five years ago. Classes of school children from K-12 should be taking responsibility for maintaining neighborhood streets, planting community gardens, recycling waste, rehabbing houses, creating healthier school lunches, visiting and doing errands for the elderly, organizing neighborhood festivals, painting public murals. The possibilities are endless. This is the fastest way to motivate all our children to learn and at the same time reverse the physical deterioration of our neighborhoods. It is a wonderful way to nurture the desire of children to be of service and provide opportunities for children with different talents to make a difference and win the respect of their peers and elders. By giving children a better reason to study than just to get a job or to advance their individual upward mobility, it will also get their cognitive juices flowing. Learning will come from practice, which has always been the best way to learn. . And just imagine how much safer and livelier our neighborhoods would become, almost overnight!

Just as we had to create a Movement in the 50s and 60s to challenge racism, we now need a movement to challenge the concept of schools as mainly training centers for jobs in the corporate structure or for individual upward mobility and to replace it with the concept of schools as places

where children learn firsthand the skills of democracy and the responsibilities of citizenship or self-government. This will require a profound change in our own thinking because we ourselves have bought into the idea that the main purpose of education should be to train personnel to fit into the corporate structure.

To help bring about this transformation in our own thinking, we need to revisit John Dewey, the American philosopher whose ideas on education were seriously studied in the decades prior to World War II but are now ignored because the only purpose of education has become training young people to compete in the corporate structure.

“The tragic weakness of the present school”, Dewey said, “is that it endeavors to prepare future members of the social order in a medium in which the conditions of the social spirit are eminently wanting. “The mere absorption of facts and truths is so exclusively individual an affair that it tends very naturally to pass into selfishness.... Where active work is going on, all this is changed.... A spirit of free communication, of interchange of ideas, of suggestions, results...becomes the dominating note”.

Education, he insisted, “is a process of living and not a preparation for future living. The school must represent present life - life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood or on the playground”.

“Our present education,” he said, “is highly specialized, one-sided and narrow. It is an education dominated almost entirely by the medieval conception of learning, something which appeals for the most part simply to the intellectual aspects of our natures, our desire to learn, to accumulate information, and to get control of the symbols of learning; not to our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce, whether in the form of utility or of art.”

Even the way we organize our classrooms robs children of creativity and initiative. „Rows of desks placed in geometrical order, crowded together so that there shall be as little moving room as possible - are all made for simply studying lessons out of a book. This attitude of listening means... passivity; that there are certain ready-made materials...which have been prepared by the school superintendent, the board, the teacher, and which the child is to take in as much as possible in the least possible time.

„From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experience he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while on the other hand he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school. That is the isolation of the school - its isolation from life.

It is because our schools are so wasteful of the creativity of our children that we have become so dependent on Ritalin and are assigning so many children to Special Ed. That is the bad news.

The good news is that here and there, in cities all over the country, some teachers and administrators are beginning to search for ways to reconnect our schools with our communities, not only for the sake of the children but for their own self-respect as teachers.

For example, In Brooklyn, NY, there is an innovative high school, the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, founded by a former member of the Young Lords, where the students do better academically because their participation in community-building activities, and especially in planting community gardens, gets their cognitive engines racing. In Detroit public school teachers in nearly four dozen schools are working with the Detroit Agricultural Network (which I helped organize) to plant community gardens. In one elementary school in my neighborhood the community agent, a science teacher, and the parents of some of the children, created the Kwanzaa Garden across the street from the school, as a way both to teach science and to grow food for the neighborhood.

. Every year hundreds of young people from colleges all over the country come to Detroit on their Spring Break to work with Save our Sons and Daughters, an anti-violence organization founded by Clementine Barfield, whose 16 year old son was killed in street violence, to create a peace movement in Detroit schools. Every year more middle school and even elementary school youngsters want to volunteer in Detroit Summer, a multicultural, intergenerational youth program movement to rebuild, redefine and respirit Detroit from the Ground UP that we founded in 1992. A couple of weeks ago I attended a meeting of a Wayne County Project in which educators and students at two middle schools, one suburban and one inner city, have been working together on a one-year project to build cultural understanding, deal with real life situations and serve the community. The Movement spirit of the participants was palpable and I was especially thrilled when the Project Co-Chair said to the group, "Up to now, we have been doing all this as an extra-curricular activity". What we need now is to make this part of the curriculum.

That is the challenge. How can we meet it? For example, can you as teachers view the new Community Service Learning requirement, not as another bureaucratic burden but as an opportunity to work with children and parents to develop community-building activities that are a normal and natural part of the curriculum from K-12?