

Promises Made, Promises Broken

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Lenin is reported to have replied when told about the successes of the Czarist educational system, “one good chemist is worth a thousand poets.” I get the distinct feeling that Leninisms are alive and well in plans for improving schools in the 21st century United States. Lenin, it seems, believed that the demands of the 20th century would be material and pragmatic, but not visionary or utopian - scientific, not poetic. New schools would be needed to prepare new Soviet citizens for jobs that would pull their economy out of its eighteenth century structures and push it into the industrial mainstream of the West. Educational standards were set accordingly, curricula were written, and Pavlov’s dog salivated. We’re told that many more chemists were produced than poets and that progress was made, ideologically speaking. Many of the educational changes took place in the name of patriotism, particularly in the name of the poor peasants who were expected one day to wither away the state through collective action. Promises were made to build a new modern society and provide personal freedom from want through responsibility.

We hear similar rhetoric in efforts to reform schools in the United States at this time, although Lenin is seldom cited as its architect. We’re told that the demands of the world economy are such that America needs chemists and other technically skilled workers to bulk up industry in order that we might throw our weight around the globe economically. It seems that the meek shall not inherit the earth, and that the meekest among us are the poor, particularly racial and linguistic minorities, women and children, all of whom are at risk of living poetic lives. That is, they are likely to be deemed useless unless they are taught the skills the economy demands.

This is a change from the original rhetoric for public schooling in America. Thomas Jefferson sought public schools to develop an informed electorate. His notion of

democracy, admittedly impoverished by his inability to see non Europeans and women as complete citizens, was directly connected to schooling. In the latest government rhetoric about schooling, however, there is more talk about the economy and civility than about personal control over one's political life. The freedom expressed in the new rhetoric about schooling and literacy is about choices for consumption. Equality is what individuals can do for themselves. Those who do poorly in school or those schools that do poorly are chided for being unproductive, rather than being undemocratic..

To reform schools, many Americans have developed standards, written curricula, and neutered Vygotsky until his work reads like Pavlov's. American schools are making progress, ideologically speaking. State mandates and standardization have enabled one educational official after another to proclaim the miracle of rising test scores. These reformed schools promise society a skilled workforce enabling transcendence in the global economy and promise individuals a productive, if not meaningful, life. The consequences of these reforms, however, may be that we have very few schools educating poets, and that along the way, we are losing alternative visions of America in the 21st century, utopian hope, and collective action. In a hopeful attempt to slow down this reformation, I use poetry to drive my argument concerning likely consequences of these new forms of Leninism across the United States

First Poem - Bertolt Brecht's Praise of Learning

Learn the elementary things

For those whose time has come.

It's never too late!

Learn the ABC. It won't be enough, but learn it.

Don't be dismayed by it!

Begin! You must take over everything.

You must take over the leadership.

Learn, man in the asylum!

Learn man in the prison!

Learn women in the kitchen!

Learn sixty year olds!

You must take over the leadership.

Seek out the schools, you who are homeless.

Acquire knowledge, you who shiver.

You who are hungry, reach for a book: It's a weapon.

You must take over the leadership.

Don't be frightened to ask, friend.

Don't be talked into anything.

Check it for yourself.

What you don't know yourself,

You don't know.

Scrutinize the bill.

It is you who must pay it.

Put your finger on each item, ask:

How did this get here?

You must take over the leadership.

In Indianapolis, Linda K. Williams ticks off her expenses for the small neatly furnished apartment that she shares with her teen-aged son: electricity, phone, groceries, medicine, life insurance, clothes, health insurance, lunch money for her son, and bus fare for both. The

expenses total nearly \$19,000 per year, yet her take home income from her job as a secretary is \$15,700. A high school graduate, divorced, and 43, Ms. Williams relies on her sisters and a boyfriend to make ends nearly meet. “I visit the food bank once a month, and James is eligible for reduced lunch prices at school,” she reports. “If I lose my job, my sisters will take me in. I know they will.”

Up the road from where I work in Pennsylvania, Katherine Ostrosky lives with her mother and four children in a trailer park. She works two part time jobs for minimum wages and no benefits. If she works 72 hours a week (that’s maximum time allowed at both jobs) for 52 weeks a year, then she makes a little over \$19,000. If she slips to sixty hours a week, however, she then falls \$2000 below the poverty line. That’s seven eight-and-one-half hour work days for a high school graduate, who manages to read about a book a week. “Mostly trashy novels,” she smiles. At 39, her husband in prison for armed robbery, her mother watches her children day and night, the federal government provides reduced lunch for her two children in school, and the state offers health insurance for her children (but not her) at what they call “a modest fee” (\$10 per child annually and a \$5 copayment for each visit). “If I lose one of my jobs, I’ll find another. My mother owns the trailer, and our car is mostly paid for.”

Roberto Ruiz, a maintenance supervisor at the Denver Convention Center, makes a little over \$17,000 a year to support a family of four. After medical insurance and taxes, he says that there isn’t enough to pay his mortgage. An increase in any fixed budget item (e.g., utility rates, school taxes, etc.) or an unexpected expense (school trip, illness, transportation problems) and his family eats less. “It’s the only flexible part of our budget.” A 37 year old veteran with a high school diploma, Mr. Ruiz must forego occasional overtime in order to accommodate his wife’s job and the lack of affordable child

care. Many months there is not enough money. “You rob Peter to pay Paul. You juggle back and forth. We’re always behind.”

None of these families are classified as poor in America. Each lives the life afforded them after the breaking of the New Deal covenant in order to “end welfare as we know it.” All enjoy the prosperity of the hundreds of thousands of new jobs created during the longest sustained economic boom in American history. The previous record from the 1960s was broken in January 2000 - over nine years without a declared recession. However, for each of the new high skill/high wage jobs created during the 1990s (that’s those jobs which pay over the median income for a family of four or about \$40,000), nine jobs with pay below \$10 an hour have been created. The children in these three families are not listed among the 23 percent of children recognized as being poor in the United States. In fact, these families are better off than the 14 percent of families who currently live on incomes below the poverty line. That absolute line was set in 1963 according to the cost of the minimum daily caloric intake needed to keep a person alive. Since Americans in 1963 spent a third of their income on food, the government set the poverty line by multiplying that cost by 3 and then multiplying that product by 365. The only changes in the poverty line since 1963 have been to adjust the basic cost according to inflation. The multipliers have remained the same.

We learn in these narratives about the lives submerged beneath the headlines of the stock markets rising and corporate mergers. The narratives animate the official stories that capitalism is the only viable alternative left for the unemployed and employed poor, and therefore, they had better prepare themselves accordingly. These stories also undermine the statistics designed to make us feel comfortable that we live in neat quintiles - poor, working class, middle class, upper middle, and rich - in which the rich receive incomes only ten times that of the poor and less than three times the middle. Seldom do we get a glimpse of the

statistics which show that ten percent of the American population control over two-thirds of the country's wealth, while the other ninety percent of us enjoy the remaining third.

Let me expand this notion of inequality a little more. According to the U. N. Development Report of 1996, over the last thirty years, the richest fifth of the world's population increased its share of the wealth from 70 % to 85%. The poorest fifth's share declined from 2.3% to 1.4% of the total. The income of the richest 358 people in the world is equal to that of the poorest 45%. That's income, not wealth. Closer to home: In 1995, Bill Gates' net worth was greater than the combined wealth of the poorest 40% of Americans. That's 106 million people. Despite the grumbling about social security in the United States Congress the stock market is not the solution. Federal Reserve statistics show that 60% of Americans own no stock at all - not even in their pension funds. The wealthiest 1 percent of Americans own nearly 50 % of all stock and the bottom 80% own only 3 percent. It's not hard to see who has benefited from the booming stock market. In the **Communist Manifesto**, Karl Marx exclaimed "you are horrified at our intending to do away with private property, but in your existing society, private property is already done away with for 9/10s of the population." That statistic still seems accurate.

Second Poem (actually a lyric) The Dead Kennedy's Kill the Poor.

Efficiency and progress is ours once more

Now that we have the neutron bomb.

It's nice and quick and clean and gets things done.

Away with excess enemy.

With no less value to property.

No sense in war, but perfect sense at home.

The sun beams down on a brand new day

Unsilently slummers gone up in a flashing light

Jobless millions whisked away.

At last we have more room to play.

All systems go to kill the poor tonight

Gonna kill, kill, kill

Kill the poor tonight

Cornell West suggests that “to be part of the democratic tradition is to be a prisoner of hope.” Many Americans hope to end poverty by meeting citizens’ and society’s critical needs through schooling. That hope begins with definitions of poverty and its causes and with theories about the relationships between individuals and society. Often this hope is presented to us through stories which promise to end poverty and to strengthen America simultaneously. Politicians, pundits and educators have several options from which to choose, each following a different ideological position within the American democratic tradition. The poor are prisoners of those choices - those stories - those promises.

Conservatives, such as Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray in **The Bell Curve**, understand the critical needs of those who are poor to be the acceptance of the facts of our stratified society which they suggest are based primarily on genetic endowment. The poor are poor because they are less intelligent, they say. Since for them, intelligence is substantially immutable, Americans should stop proposing policies which force the unprepared in to jobs and positions for which they are intellectually unequipped. This, they argue, is bad for society and also bad for the individual. Rather, conservatives say the critical needs of the poor are met by letting the economy do its work and teaching the poor that the best things in life are free - friends, family, and community. For conservatives, welfare breeds dependency, affirmative action pushes minorities and women beyond their levels of competence, and compensatory schooling retards the intelligent and frustrates the

unintelligent. Herrnstein and Murray conclude, “For many people, there is nothing they can learn that will repay the cost of the teaching.”

Conservatives are straight-forward in their suggestions for school reform. They value reductions of state involvement through privatization and local control, but they seek testing to rank order students to determine what schooling will best prepare each for his or her station in life.

Neoconservatives promote moral literacy as the cure for poverty. They argue that the poor are poor because they lack the moral values that enable one to prosper. This same lack of morals allows the poor to justify a life of crime within a democracy. In the **Book of Virtues**, former Secretary of Education, William Bennett defines the values as: self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and faith. Mark Gerson argues that the poor lack these morals because they come from a culture of poverty which does not offer them sufficient numbers of moral models to instantiate these values within community members. Bennett suggests, moral education traditionally has been the work of home and church and was extended to the school during this century. However, since World War II, he suggests that the “infusion of diversity in schools and a surfeit of confusion, bureaucratic thinking and community apathy “has led to a moral decline in poor Americans. In a later book, **The Death of Outrage**, Bennett describes the general decline of moral literacy among all Americans based on the popular acceptance of the Clinton/Lewinsky affair. Now everyone needs moral literacy, and Bennett is prepared to sell the moral curriculum to meet this critical individual and societal need.

Neoconservatives favor school reform which will instill the moral code of Western civilization in every American. According to Bennett’s latest book, **The Educated Child**, this reform requires memorization of standardized facts akin to E. D. Hirsch’s core curriculum with a moral literacy overlay.

President Clinton’s neoliberal views on poverty suggest that we should take the deal of global capitalism because we have no choice because there are no viable alternatives. The

poor should prepare themselves to compete better in the marketplace during their entire lives. Since the educational policy of America 2000 (which Clinton helped write for the Bush Administration), the federal government has called for world class schools based on the demands of capital because the information economy will make us all rich. All of us, that is, who develop our human capital, continuously upgrading our work skills. National standards, national examinations, the America Reads Initiative, networked schools, job training, etc. have been directed at individuals to help each to prepare for the prosperity which awaits.

School reform for neoliberals means that capitalism has its way with schools. Because capitalism must reformulate itself to accommodate a global scale, the institutions that support business must be reformulated also. At the same time we see huge profits for the wealthy, we see towns and cities crumbling when companies move factories and headquarters to increase profits, families dissolve because economic pressures, and local and state governments bid to lure corporate interest to their locations. Schooling, as we know it, is beginning to change in order to develop entrepreneurs instead of factory workers. All that is solid melts into air without regard for the people or social structures, save one. The rich get richer. It's nothing personal; it's just business say neoliberals.

But as former Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich recanted in **Locked in the Cabinet**, "I came to Washington thinking the answer was simply to provide people in the bottom half with access to the education and skills they need to qualify for better jobs. But it's more than that. Without power, they can't get the resources for good schools and affordable higher education or training. Powerless, they can't even guarantee safe workplaces, maintain a livable minimum wage, or prevent sweatshops from reemerging. Without power, they can't force highly profitable companies to share the profits with them. Powerless, they're as expendable as old pieces of machinery."

Liberals argue that the poor are poor because they are denied equal opportunities in life, and therefore they need governmental assistance to gain access to the best opportunities

available Programs that advocates of the other political groups assail are the bread and butter of liberal solutions to poverty: Affirmative action, Medicare, social security, Title IX in sports, etc. Each program is directed to open opportunities to those who have been denied access to jobs, education, healthcare, and independence in the past. To stop the regeneration of poverty among the young, liberals seek to identify the best practices of education among the well-to-do and make them equally available to the poor. As Iris Rotberg and James Harvey told Congress in 1993 “low income and minority students have less contact with the best qualified and more experienced teachers, the teachers most often likely to master the kinds of instruction strategies considered effective for all students”. Most educational research is in this liberal tradition of helping the poor. Title 1, standardized testing, and teacher/school effectiveness are all liberal attempts to discover, and then, improve the best methods, making sure that the poor have access to them.

Perhaps you are aware that we have liberals to thank for the prominent position of testing in schooling. Bobby Kennedy tacked an assessment rider on the initial Title 1 Bill to ensure that racist school personnel would spend the new federal money on the education of poor kids. The test scores, he thought, would inform parents whether or not schools were being effective in providing equal opportunity. Today liberals find themselves quoting Kennedy on this matter often without really knowing it. Standards and tests are in the poor’s best interest say liberals. But as Mainer Brenda Power explained in **Education Week** last winter, test scores show that kids in Maine read better than most other Americans, however, that skill still doesn’t lead to employment when there are not many good jobs available.

Each of these positions places the onus of beating poverty upon the poor. Advocates pretend that all of the conditions are in place to end poverty except the solution they champion. Each has its own version of the schooling success equation - reformed schooling promises academic success for all, which in turn will translate into high skills, bringing high wages or happiness to all Americans. Conservatives say extend tracking

through high stakes testing. Neoconservatives hope to insert moral literacy. Neoliberals will raise the academic standards in order to create lifelong learners. Liberals will end the barriers to the best instructional practices for all. Employ their solution, and in a short time, there will be no poverty in America because the economy will find lucrative places for all (or at least, we will learn to be happy with the places it does find for us). Tell that to the Linda Williams, the Katherine Ostroskys or the Roberto Ruiz of this country. Try and sell it to their children.

In their own ways, each of these four positions attempts to employ the Dead Kennedy's solution to drop a neutron bomb on the poor in order to end poverty without disrupting property values or the basic relative economic relationships among the classes in our classless society. All rely on the absolute, and not relative, notions of poverty. All that need be accomplished is to push the poor over the dollar amount to keep them alive. In this way, advocates of each position see Linda, Katherine and Roberto as American school success stories. Each is a high school graduate with additional job training. Advocates of the alternatives claim that the promises of schooling have been kept to these individuals and their families. We just find two minimum wage jobs for the other 14 percent who languish below that line, then we would be well on our way to meeting the social promise of schooling as well.

Poetry Anyone?

But can we continue to call America a democracy with a gap in income and power in which ten percent of the population controls two-thirds of the wealth and even more of the power? Can we call America a democracy when five corporations control three quarters of the media and access to information? Can we call America a democracy when so few Americans understand the connection between power and literacy portrayed in Bertolt

Brecht's poem or Robert Reich's point about power for what he calls "the bottom of society"?

Brecht tells us to learn to read because it is a weapon in the class war that has marked Western history for several centuries. As Robert Bellah writes in **The Good Citizen**, "There is a class war today, but it is neither being waged by people like me nor by the people suffering most in today's world. Class war today is being waged ruthlessly, largely effectively, and with little resistance, by the rich on the poor both nationally and globally." Reich wants us to recognize that we share more in common with Linda Williams, Katherine Ostrosky and Roberto Ruiz than we do with Charles Murray, William Bennett, or Bill Clinton. Brecht hopes our literacy will be an inquiring one - one that helps us to ask, "how did things get this way", "why do they stay this way", "who is and who is not involved in making these decisions?" And at least Brecht thinks schools could help. Imagine that! Schools designed to help the 90 percent of Americans defend themselves against the rich.

Radical Democrats take up the issues which Brecht and Reich articulate. They acknowledge the failures of twentieth century attempts at democracy and the possibilities of new literacies to explore and act on both freedom and equality. They argue that the past failures were predictable based upon the inabilities of conservatives, liberals, even collectivists, to address these issues imaginatively. Although conservatives, neoconservatives, neoliberals, liberals, and collectivists claim their positions to be founded on principles of both freedom and equality, their respective visions of what's good for Americans and America force them to demand consensus for action based on their terms alone. To the contrary, radical democrats suggest that democracy *requires* adversarial relations among social actors as they advocate their interpretations and their preferred social identities. As Claudia Mouffee explains:

It is the tension between consensus - on the values of freedom and equality - and dissensus- on interpretation - that makes possible the agonistic dynamics of pluralist democracy. This is why democracy's survival depends on the possibility of forming collective political identities around clearly differentiated positions and choices among real alternatives.”

Many members of the poor and the ninety percent with little power reject the identities that traditional political ideologies afford them. Conservatives and neoconservatives offer us rather fixed identities with few chances to articulate what possible life choices might be brought into existence and to choose among those alternatives. These limits deter our interests in participating in civic life, whether local or at a distance, because either consciously or unconsciously we understand the limits of our freedom and the absence of equality within these ideological conditions. Of course our alienation leaves traditional hierarchies and power relations unchanged and little challenged which is part of the conservative agenda, I think. Liberals (old and neo) encourage our freedom only if it acts like a neutron bomb and does not disrupt the social, economic, and political structures and order. Despite the outward appearances of difference, the consequences of liberalism are much like that of conservatism with more cultural freedom allowed. Perhaps this explains why some critics find so little difference between US political parties and choices. Liberal tolerance of cultural freedom is not necessarily helpful to the poor and powerless as Nancy Fraser explains.

The liberal version of multiculturalism is premised on a one-sidedly positive understanding of difference. It celebrates difference uncritically while failing to interrogate its relation to inequality. Like American pluralism, the tradition from which it descends, it proceeds - contrary to fact - as if United States society contained no class divisions or other deep seated structural injustices, as if its political economy were basically just, as if its various constituent groups were

socially equal. Thus, it treats difference as pertaining exclusively to culture. The result is to divorce questions of difference from material inequality, power differentials among groups, and systematic relations of dominance and subordination.

For democracy to work, radical democrats argue that individuals must recognize that their identities are multiple and fluid - not only fixed by class, race or gender. We are all members of many social groups that influence our thoughts, actions, and values in substantial ways, and we vary our hierarchical arrangements of those memberships according to circumstance and intentions. Beyond that recognition, however, citizens must learn to use the power of their memberships to force clear articulations of positions by forming large coalitions to enact their shared concerns. Perhaps the best recent example of this is the demonstrations which sent the World Trade Organization packing from Seattle. There were groups from many nations, many races, many classes who were willing to look beyond their differences to seek common ground and some power. Perhaps the worst example of this is the inability of coalitions to form in order to force presidential and other candidates for government office to articulate anything remotely resembling a clear position. Nor have we been successful in forcing media - even ones that use the public funds - to allow candidates with clear alternatives to receive an airing.

Democracy, then, hinges on the development of individuals' identities that are committed to the values of freedom and equality (blended with the values of their other group memberships) and to active participation in civic life. Although that identity cannot be fully specified, it requires at least three elements: reflexive agency, the will to act, and the ability to make room for the adversaries.

Reflexive agency invites citizens to evaluate the world in terms of their intentions and values and, at the same time, to evaluate those intentions and to reflect upon those values. In

this way, citizens take inventory of their identities, their values, their motives, and their actions, investigate the sources of those parts of themselves, and make choices about which ones they hope to enhance and which they hope to diminish.

The will to act, which for many has been diverted from public to private matters, must be redirected through individuals' sociological imaginations - the recognition that their apparently private problems are really connected to public issues because that problem is shared by many. Linda Williams is African American. Katherine Ostrowsky is Polish American. And Roberto Ruiz is Mexican American. They enjoy many different group memberships in religious, recreational, and informal groups. Each thinks of her or his situation as unique and private - they have internalized conservative rhetoric of personal responsibility for their economic situations. Yet they share the common problem that public life affords them little economic opportunity and those that are available will not keep them well or serve their children. As individuals become aware of the political possibilities of their multiple and fluid identities, they begin to see real opportunities to form larger, more effective coalitions for accomplishing goals shared across social groups. Reflexive agency ensures that coalitions will not become fixed power blocks as basic and secondary assumptions for action are consistently scrutinized.

Because those identities are not fixed and future intersections of values cannot be predetermined, citizens begin to recognize the need to **respect the positions of their adversaries** - not to the point of agreement, certainly, but enough to recognize commitment to the shared principles of freedom and equality. This is one lesson learned from the split between the new and old left in the 1960s, which created room for neo-conservatism to evolve. The limits on this respect are set by individuals' and groups' commitments to those principles. Anyone rejecting freedom and/or equality outright stands outside the democratic process, and therefore, becomes the legitimate object of democratic scorn.

Radical Democrats seek to identify and establish the social conditions that produce democratic citizenship. Schooling figures prominently within radical democratic explorations. They offer a critique of current ideological positions, for example: Joe Kincheloe's critique of the Bell Curve logic, Colin Greer and Herb Kohl's reconsideration of William Bennett's virtues, James Gee, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear's critique of neo-liberal schooling, and Stanley Aronowitz's objection to liberal's science as the dominant form of human knowledge. Some radical democratic educators move beyond critique to hope as in Donaldo Macedo's challenge to what every American should know. Sy Knoiblauch and Lil Brannon's demonstration of whose mind is closed, Gerald Coles' exploration of the science behind recent governmental policy on schooling, Arlette Willis and Violet Harris' insistence that race be considered in educational research, Curt Dudley Marling and Sharon Murphy's challenges to Reading Recovery, Carole Edelsky's repositioning of whole language, Lisa Delpit's blasting of progressive education, and Denny Taylor's ideas about toxic literacies. Each of these educators attempts to address the question - how do we create schools which promise to provide the poor with the weapon and tool of literacy so that they can engage in public life with the increased possibility of disrupting the relations of wealth and power in this country?

In a sense these educators are offering suggestions for how schools might develop more poets in America - makers, inventors, visionaries, utopians - who can think and act outside our current understandings of freedom and equality. None rejects chemists or their science, but each recognizes the need for more poets to help us rethink our lives and the structures we have and will create for them. I think these educators believe that there is poetry in each of us - that we can be called poets, offering alternative arrangements of space and social processes in order to that we might increase our conditions of freedom while ensuring more equal distribution of recognition, wealth and power. Radical democratic educators make these promises to individuals and society. Perhaps through our actions, we

can bring new meaning to the term poetic justice. I close with three personal projects of radical democratic schooling.

Schooling for Poets

The first project invited first and second graders and their families to learn about farming in Pennsylvania and its importance to the state's history, its economics, and its health. We have engaged in a year long study of farming and farm life. Our work began in August, learning the lyrics for the song *The Farmer is the One Who Feeds Us All*. That song touches on the social struggles high interest rates, rising costs, and low prices which drive farmers deeper into debt while they grow the food that feeds us all. We used the internet to test the lyrics against the realities of farmers across America. Relying on relatives and acquaintances as experts, we began to discuss and write about issues of fairness and markets for farmers in our community. Young as they are, they were able to form judgments on rights and responsibilities. Our efforts in the Fall connected us with a migrant education project in Southern Valley. We spent three days in a collaborative educational project in which the children of migrant workers and the our students discussed issue of farming, popular culture, and families. Two newspapers were produced during the three days and a children's campaign was initiated for better funding for migrant education materials. We wrote letters to State government and local corporations, which yielded both photo opportunities for politicians and businessmen and commitments to provide more funds for migrant education.

I offer the *Towns/Farms Together Project* as a reasonable example of radical democratic schooling. Reflexive agency enabled us to open families', teachers' and children's intentions and values for personal and social inspection. Our efforts to read and write about what we understood about farming and fairness changed our lives and brought us in contact with people different than ourselves. The will to act arose from those contacts

as our differing amounts of cultural capital enabled us to see common goals. Our efforts to help brought us in contact with adversaries of family farming - the state and agribusiness. Although reluctant to trust these groups, the children decided by consensus to join them in lobbying for more migrant education funds.

The second project took place at an alternative secondary school. No bells, little control of bodies outside of class time, cross age, interdisciplinary work. The school is small, and I worked with 8 students in an historical documentaries course which combined historiography with film production, including analog and digital editing. Watching documentaries while reading about the social construction of history prepared these ninth through twelfth graders for their productions. Six projects were completed: a documentary about a struggle over the inclusion of sexual orientation in the public school district's harassment policy, an oral history of the WPA projects in the area, a document history of the largest black agricultural community above the Mason-Dixon line, a film about the KKK recruitment in area high schools, a aerial photographic investigation of the loss of green space during the last 20 years, and a film about the struggle over the water supply for a local village. We understand these documentaries to be open inquiries into personal and social values, actions to inform community, and a way to look at many sides of an issue in order to see who might be involved in productive ways.

These two examples of "schooling for poets" took place alternative schools. The first is a private elementary school, and the second is the equivalent of a charter school. The third project is small but on-going attempt to move such pedagogy into mainstream schooling. The project is a decade old and has involved hundreds of teachers in different parts of North America. We work from Roger Simon's notion of projects of possibility - the idea that the contradictions between social forms and human freedom are opportunities for civic action. We read articles on theory, research, and pedagogy - many from the educators employing radical democratic ideas - and then, plan and launch projects to extend both social forms and freedoms toward what may be possible, but as yet are unknown.

Current projects include: an exploration of tensions between undergraduate students and international students' teaching assistants, an attempt to blend English, History and technology within local high school students' investigations of their identities, an effort to write an accompanying pamphlet for girls who are asked to read the **Book of Virtues**, a search for postcolonial children's literature to become part of the required reading list in Puerto Rican schools, a brochure for working parents on negotiating homework with children and schools, postings about the official and unofficial structures among Phish Phans, and a project to identify, list, and distribute website addresses by and for progressing educators.

Each of these projects, whether directed by young children, adolescents, or adults, attempts to develop reflexive agency, the will to act, and respect for adversaries in attempts to grow powerful literacies among the poor and powerless. In the millennium issue of the **Reading Research Quarterly**, Kathy Au and Taffy Raphael conclude - "The 20th century has been characterized as an era of broken promises in schooling. We hold out hope that the 21st century will be characterized as an era of promises kept." The Brecht poem reminds us how the promises might be kept in the future, not by simply learning the ABCs but by using our literacies to act. In the Coda of the book, **Poetry for the People**, June Jordan makes this point as well.

I ain't goin' nowhere unless you come with me
I say, I ain't goin' nowhere less'n you come with me
I ain't about to be some leaf that lose its tree
So take my hand, see how I'm reachin' out for you
Hey, here's my hand, see how I'm reachin out for you
We got a whole lot more than only one of us can do