

An Overview of Riane Eisler's *Tomorrow's Children*

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Tomorrow's Children is an important book about education, because it addresses topics that normally concern teachers and administrators—curriculum, teaching/learning methods, and school culture—within a larger philosophical and historical context than educators normally consider. As its subtitle indicates, in *Tomorrow's Children* Riane Eisler proposes a new blueprint for education in the 21st century.

Much of modern educational practice still views children as impersonal components of an efficient social machine to be molded, tested, graded, and sorted like any other mechanical products or commodities. Eisler provides a stirring alternative vision for education. She argues that postindustrial society requires men and women who are flexible, creative, and independent thinkers, and that different educational practices are needed to cultivate these qualities. But the education Eisler proposes goes much further. Education, after all, does not simply involve a package of techniques practiced in school buildings: it is a cluster of beliefs, values and assumptions representing a culture's explicit endeavor to define who we are as human beings and what our lives mean.

[*Tomorrow's Children*](#) builds on the research in archeology, biology and psychology that Eisler presented in her earlier book, [*The Chalice and The Blade*](#), published in 1987. After studying the evolution of numerous societies through history, Eisler developed a "cultural transformation theory" which identifies two basic structures that influence the character of any civilization, and in *Tomorrow's Children* she amply demonstrates how this way of understanding culture is extremely relevant to education.

These two structures represent opposite ends of a spectrum of cultural possibilities. At one end, societies can be rigid and authoritarian, where violence, abuse and fear are used to maintain order and keep elites in power... The opposite ideal structure is characterized by egalitarian and democratic values, gender equity, collaboration, caretaking, and openness to diversity, environmental consciousness, and low levels of violence. Eisler terms this the partnership system.

"Partnership Education," then, is not merely a curriculum unit or instruction technique—it is an effort to nurture the full humanity of our young people for the purpose of creating a caring, peaceful, environmentally sustainable society.

A partnership approach addresses three major elements of education: structure (the organization of decision-making and teaching roles), process (pedagogical relationships that invite the child to engage in learning in his or her wholeness), and content (a rich selection of thought-provoking experiences and narratives that enable young people to deeply understand their place in culture, history and the natural world). *Tomorrow's Children* explains how an education for cultural transformation depends upon the integration of these elements, and Eisler uses the metaphor of a

tapestry being woven on a loom with vertical and horizontal threads and cross-stitchings, to illustrate the complexity and interconnectedness of Partnership Education.

The particular techniques that Eisler recommends to give what she calls partnership process concrete form in classrooms are familiar to many educators -cooperative learning strategies, applications of multiple intelligence theory, integrated curriculum and experiential, project-based learning, to name a few. But Partnership Education goes much further. It grounds process, content, and structure in an integrated approach more than in any one specific method. It further differs from many contemporary educational proposals in that it is not simply an add-on to the existing educational system.

Although *Tomorrow's Children* offers materials that can be immediately used by educators and students, it offers an approach that fully integrates gender-balance, multiculturalism, and environmental consciousness, as well as nonviolent conflict resolution, ethics, and caring into the entire educational fabric...Eisler emphasizes the need for critical, reflective intelligence joined with the cultivation of empathy...

Partnership Education essentially aims to empower young people to make thoughtful choices by offering them alternative experiences (partnership process), environments (partnership structure), and narratives (partnership content), rather than to forcibly inculcate certain forms of knowledge and values. It is also designed to cultivate what Eisler calls self-regulation (a term she prefers to self-discipline) so that young people learn to be ethical and caring primarily out of intrinsic positive motivations rather than extrinsic negative motivations, such as fear of punishment.

One recurring theme in *Tomorrow's Children* is the belief that education in a democratic society must exhibit a deep sense of respect for human diversity and personal autonomy rather than seek to mold young people according to arbitrary standards: "We need to pay more attention to how children can develop their unique individual potentials rather than merely focusing on standardized test scores." Schools are seen as nurturing communities of learning.

There is a tendency in our society to assume that nurturing communities or schools based on caring are somehow contradictory to personal achievement. *Tomorrow's Children* shows that this is a false assumption. In fact, it is in nurturing communities of learning that young people can freely access their human striving to excel, to be the best they can be. But while Partnership Education allows educators to better help students realize their individual potentials, Eisler recognizes that what is sometimes called excellence in learning has to go beyond temporary academic achievement to long-range personal development. She also recognizes that excellence cannot just be measured by tests designed to sort students and measure only some of what a student knows in comparison to what others know. True excellence in education focuses on the whole student as a unique individual, and can only be measured through more integrative assessment tools using multiple formats for reporting what students have really learned

Partnership Education attempts not only to inform young people, but to inspire them. One stirring chapter of *Tomorrow's Children*, "Beginnings: From the Stars to Us," discusses humanity's place in the vast evolution of life in the cosmos. "What is the meaning of our journey on this Earth?" asks Eisler. "What about us connects us with, and distinguishes us from, the rest of nature?" Where conventional schooling often gives young people a fragmented batch of facts and curriculum "units," Partnership Education "offers young people a panoramic view of the creative sweep of evolution that reveals the general evolutionary movement toward ever greater variability, complexity of structure, integration of function, and flexibility of behavior." Evolution, and therefore human life, is creative, purposeful, and capable of unfathomable possibilities. Eisler provides an updated meta-narrative of evolution (from cosmic to cultural and personal) focusing on human possibilities rather than limitations. She explains that the uncritical application to human evolution of neo-Darwinian biology, with its emphasis on the purely selfish competitive struggle for survival, does not represent a neutral scientific finding, but is rather grounded in a theoretical position conditioned by the worldview of a dominator culture.

In this chapter as well as another called "From Counting to Current Events: Making the Three R's Meaningful," *Tomorrow's Children* shows a different approach to science education, one that embraces a more balanced, holistic understanding of the world. Eisler describes extensive scientific literature that documents the importance of love, caring and cooperation in the evolution of life, and she charges that most of the education young people receive about the natural world and biology neglects these significant and uncontested findings. In these and other ways, Partnership Education integrates environmental education into the core curriculum...

Eisler repeatedly shows that harmful messages are often embedded in the school curriculum. For example, even though children are told that nonviolence is good and violence is bad, they are at the same time required to memorize the dates of wars and battles as the historically significant events, with little attention given to nonviolently achieved social reforms... So again, children... fail to receive a holistic understanding of human possibilities. *Tomorrow's Children* shows how this vital understanding can be cultivated through various academic disciplines, from mathematics to history to literature and art.

Another important topic in this book is critical media literacy. Young people in the modern world are educated by television, film, music, journalism and other popular media at least as much as they are by parents and schools, and Eisler shows how many of the images and narratives promoted through mass media convey dominator rather than partnership values. "Children will learn that men are considered more important than women. . .and that white people are more important than other people . . . By the end of elementary school, the average child will have witnessed 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on the TV screen" and will have been repeatedly exposed to violence being celebrated in movies and video games. The media also send strong messages-both overt and subliminal-about ideal body image, sexuality and intimate relationships that in many ways can be psychologically damaging as well as harmful to positive, healthy relationships. An education for partnership values must help young people become conscious of harmful beliefs and behavior patterns that are taught mindlessly and insidiously by the mass media. Again, Eisler emphasizes that the point is not to moralize or censor but to "open channels of communication" and help young people think

through the consequences of the behaviors and ideas that surround them.

Eisler passionately argues for a new educational system that can help young people face the unprecedented challenges of our time. She believes that modern civilization is at a crucial turning point, with two possible scenarios for future development. If recent trends continue unchallenged, we may well face societal and ecological breakdown—a future of warfare, terrorism, ethnic violence, pollution and habitat destruction, and various forms of fundamentalism. The alternative is breakthrough or cultural transformation, the evolution of a partnership-oriented society "governed by standards of human rights and responsibilities... a world where our human adventure unfolds in creative and caring ways, where the human spirit can flourish."

Tomorrow's Children argues that substantive change in education is vital to achieving such a breakthrough, as young people who acquire a more holistic (multicultural, gender-balanced, environmentally sensitive, critically aware and flexible) understanding of human possibilities, and who have opportunities to practice participating in democratic communities, will be much better prepared to join in building a more humane, caring, environmentally sustainable society than those merely drilled in what are today considered academic basics and graded competitively.

Eisler best sums up the goal of Partnership Education when she uses the phrase Caring for Life. That is exactly what we need to do, on a personal as well as cultural and ecological scale, if we are to avoid a violent disintegration of modern civilization.

In closing, Eisler challenges the reader of *Tomorrow's Children* to join an emerging cultural movement that is concerned with social equity, participatory democracy, environmental sustainability and personal self realization... Eisler envisions a time in the near future when tomorrow's children "will be aware of the enormous range of their human potentials. They will be equipped to cultivate the positives within themselves and others. They will understand what makes for real political and economic democracy, and be equipped to help create and maintain it."