

Transforming Society: A Partnership Educational Agenda

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Turning Points: 27 Visionaries in Education Tell Their Own Stories

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Alternative Educational Resources Organization (AERO), 2010



Riane Eisler 2009

Educational debates have largely centered on standards, testing, and other procedural reforms. Unfortunately this debate ignores not only children’s individual needs and capacities but also the role education plays in forming children’s views about what is normal or abnormal, possible or impossible, right or wrong. In short, the conventional conversation about education ignores the critical matter of whether children grow up to accept an unjust status quo or understand they can play a role in social transformation.

My interest in education as a means for social transformation is rooted in my early life experiences. On November 10, 1938 – later known as Crystal Night because so much glass was shattered in Jewish stores, homes, and synagogues – a gang of Nazis came for my father, shoved him down the stairs, and dragged him off. Miraculously, my mother obtained his release, and

my parents and I fled my native Vienna and eventually got to Cuba. Had we remained in Europe, we would almost certainly have been killed.

These early childhood experiences led to burning questions. Why is there so much cruelty, destructiveness, and hate in the world? Is this our inevitable lot? Or can we create a more peaceful, just, and caring world?

It was only much later that I began to systematically look for answers to these questions. For much of my childhood, adolescence, and early womanhood, I was too involved in simply trying to make it through what was first a harsh and lonely environment in Cuba and then struggling to adapt to what was socially expected of me. It was only when it was clear that these expectations were wrong for me that I embarked on the road that eventually led to my research and writing – including my writings on transformative education.

My Early Life

The Nazis confiscated (that is, officially stole) my parent's business, bank accounts, and most of their other possessions. We fled with just a few pieces of luggage, and arrived in Cuba almost destitute. I grew up in the industrial slums of Havana, where we remained even after my parents started a new business. But already before then, they scrimped and saved to do what Jews often consider most important: providing their children with the best possible education.

What this meant for my parents was sending me to the best private schools. So first I went to a bilingual Methodist school (where among other things I was constantly importuned to raise my hand and say I believe in Jesus Christ, a terrible burden on a little girl trying to do what was expected both at home and school – which were miles apart). Then, I was sent to a British school in the suburbs (attended by the scions of Cuba's extraordinarily rich café society elites), commuting every day by streetcar from the industrial slums to where the rich lived (a kind of daily culture shock).

And so I received a classical education. It was a rigorous education, and I will always be grateful for it, as it included not only a focus on classics but also Latin and other subjects that are not part of the U.S. curriculum. In fact, when I came to the U.S. at the age of 14 (my parents always saw Cuba as just an anteroom to finally obtaining a U.S. visa), my high school classes

were so boring I can honestly say I learned almost nothing of use there. The same was actually true of my first two years at UCLA, even though that was a step up.

However, since early childhood I had been an avid reader, so that much of my education came from books from outside school. Though my parents were rather strict and overprotective (in typical European fashion), for some strange reason they hardly paid any attention to what I read. So my readings were wide-ranging, from French novels I only understood much later (I started reading those when I was 10) to intermittent excursions into philosophy and science, including Plato and later Marx.

I should say, however, that when I came to the U.S. as an adolescent, having been a stranger in a strange land for seven years in Cuba, I was above all hungry to belong. So much of my energy went into trying to, at last, belong that I did not really care that much that I was bored silly in my classes. Moreover, my parents, as was the norm at that time, saw my going to university as mainly a way to get an Mrs. degree – that is, to marry a professional man and assume my womanly life roles as wife and mother.

Even though I was a brilliant student, (Phi Beta Kappa, etc.) it never seemed to occur to any of my professors, or anyone else, that I should be encouraged to pursue a career of my own – much less that I should be groomed to make a significant intellectual contribution. So it was only gradually that I began to awake to these possibilities.

My Middle Years

My first job after graduating from UCLA was as a social scientist at the Systems Development Corporation, an offshoot of the Rand Corporation. I did not like the work because my employers were only interested in military systems. But I learned a basic principle of systems thinking: that looking at how different parts of a system interact makes it possible to see more than just the sum of its parts.

I wasn't aware at that time that studying social systems would become my life's work. That was in the 1950s, and many things happened before I returned to the fundamental questions of my childhood. By the time I did it was the 1970s, and I had become aware of something I had been completely unconscious of: that while being a Jew and an immigrant had obviously, and critically, affected my life, so also had being born female. Indeed, I realized that if I felt like an

outsider it was not only because I was an immigrant and a Jew but because hardly any of what I was taught as “important knowledge and truth” was about or by those who like I are female. This new consciousness not only led me to take a leadership role in the 1960s women’s movement; it also profoundly affected my approach to the study of human societies.

By that time I had married and had given birth to two daughters. Like many of us, I saw that the global crises futurists then called the *world problematique* can’t be solved by the system that created them. I saw that a grim future awaits my children – and all of us – if we don’t make transformative social changes.

The question was: transformation to what? And that in turn led me back to the questions of my childhood, questions about whether injustice and violence are inevitable or whether we can construct a social system that supports more just, sustainable, and peaceful relationships.

From Conventional Categories to Holistic Frameworks

When I embarked on my transdisciplinary, crosscultural, historical analysis of human societies, I developed a new approach: the *study of relational dynamics*. This is a method of inquiry that differs markedly from traditional studies. To begin with, it draws from a much wider data base. While most social studies, including most so-called systems studies, focus primarily on the so-called public sphere of political and economic relations, the study of relational dynamics looks at the whole of our lives – including our family and other intimate relations. Unlike the majority of studies (often aptly called “the study of man”), it takes into account the whole of humanity — both its female and male halves. And rather than examining one period at a time, it looks at the whole span of history — including the long period before written records called prehistory.

A basic principle of systems theory is that if we don’t look at the whole of a system, we can’t see the connections between its various components – just like if we look at only part of a picture we can’t see the relationship between its different parts. Using this larger data base made it possible to see connections between different parts of social systems that are not visible otherwise. It was now possible to see patterns or configurations repeating themselves crossculturally and historically. Since there were no names for these social configurations, I called one the *domination system* and the other the *partnership system*.

Conventional categories, such as ancient/modern, Eastern/Western, religious/secular, rightist/leftist, technologically developed/undeveloped, and capitalist/communist only describe certain aspects of social systems. They do not take into account the totality of the institutions, assumptions, beliefs, relationships, and activities that constitute a culture. They pay hardly any attention to the cultural construction of the formative childhood relations and the relations between the male and female halves of humanity – even though these primary human relations are foundational to what people learn to consider normal or abnormal, possible or impossible, moral or immoral.

By contrast, the domination system and the partnership system describe interactions that establish and maintain two very different types of relations– from intimate to international. One type is based on rigid rankings of domination ultimately backed up by fear and force. The other type is based on mutual respect, mutual accountability, and mutual benefit.

Two Human Possibilities: Domination or Partnership

No society orients completely to either the domination or partnership continuum. But the degree to which it does profoundly affects which of our large repertoire of human traits and behaviors – from caring and sensitivity to cruelty and insensitivity – are culturally reinforced or inhibited.

Some of the most brutally violent, repressive societies of the twentieth century were Hitler's Germany (a technologically advanced, Western, rightist society), Stalin's USSR (a secular leftist society), Khomeini's Iran (an Eastern religious society), and Idi Amin's Uganda (a tribalist society). There are obvious differences between them. But they all share the core configuration of the domination system.

The first component of this configuration is a structure of rigid top-down rankings: hierarchies of domination maintained through physical, psychological, and economic control. This structure is found in both the family and the state or tribe, and is the template or mold for all social institutions.

The second core component is the rigid ranking of one half of humanity over the other half. Theoretically, this could be the female half over the male half. But in practice, it has been the ranking of the male half over the female half. Along with this, we see the high valuing of

“hard” qualities and behaviors, such as “heroic” violence and “manly” conquest and control. I want to emphasize that these are not qualities inherent in men but rather qualities stereotypically associated with “real masculinity” in dominator ideology.

The third core component of domination systems is culturally accepted abuse and violence, from child-and- wife-beating to chronic warfare. Every society has some abuse and violence. But in cultures orienting to the domination system, we find the institutionalization and idealization of abuse and violence to maintain hierarchies of domination – man over woman, man over man, race over race, and nation over nation.

The fourth core component consists of beliefs that dominator relations are inevitable, even moral. In cultures and subcultures that orient closely to the domination model, we find teachings and stories that it’s honorable and moral to kill and enslave neighboring nations or tribes, stone women to death, stand by while “inferior” races are put in ovens and gassed, or beat children to impose one’s will. In this belief system, there are only two options. You either dominate or you are dominated. Therefore, both war and the “war of the sexes” are inevitable. The guiding belief is that there is no other alternative.

The partnership system has a very different core configuration, also consisting of four interactive, mutually supporting components.

The first core component is a democratic and egalitarian structure. This structure is found in both the family and the state or tribe, and is the template for other institutions. That is not to say that there are no rankings. But they are what I call *hierarchies of actualization* rather than *hierarchies of domination*. These are more flexible hierarchies in which power is viewed not as power *over* but as power *to* and power *with*: the kind of power described in the progressive management literature today as inspiring and supporting, rather than controlling, others.

The second core component is equal partnership between women and men. With this comes a high valuing, in *both* women and men, of qualities and behaviors such as nonviolence, nurturance, and caregiving denigrated as “soft,” feminine,” and “unmanly” in domination systems.

The third core component of the partnership system is that abuse and violence isn’t culturally accepted. This doesn’t mean that there is no abuse or violence. But they aren’t

institutionalized or idealized, because they're not needed to maintain rigid rankings of domination.

The fourth core component consists of beliefs about human nature that support empathic and mutually respectful relations. Although cruelty and violence are recognized as human possibilities, they're not considered inevitable, much less moral.

Cultures that orient to the partnership end of the partnership/domination continuum also transcend conventional categories such as religious or secular, Eastern or Western, industrial, pre-industrial, or post-industrial. Among the Teduray, a technologically primitive tribal society in the Phillipines, as anthropologist Stuart Schlegel writes, family and social structure were egalitarian and social relations unranked and peaceful. Decision-making was typically participatory; softer, stereotypically 'feminine' virtues were valued; and nature and the human body were given great respect. Similarly, among the agrarian Minagkabau of Sumatra, women play major social roles, violence is not part of childraising, and stereotypically feminine values such as caring and nurturing are valued – not only in women but also in men.

Orientation to the partnership core configuration can also be seen in the highly technologically developed, industrialized Nordic societies. These are not ideal societies. But they are democratic cultures where there aren't huge gaps between haves and have-nots, where women have higher status, and where nurturance and nonviolence are considered appropriate behavior for men as well as women and are supported by fiscal policy.

Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland built societies with both political and economic democracy and succeeded in creating a generally good living standard for all. This success has sometimes been attributed to the fact that they are relatively small and homogeneous. But smaller and even more homogeneous societies, such as some of the oil-rich nations of the Middle East where there are large gaps between haves and have-nots, orient closely to the domination system. So to understand why the Nordic nations developed a more caring and equitable economics we have to look at other factors. And one such factor is that women in the Nordic world have held the highest political offices, and a larger proportion of legislators (over 40 percent) are female than anywhere else in the world.

As among the Teduray and Minagkabau, the higher status of women in the Nordic world has important consequences for how men define masculinity. As the status of women rises, so

also does the status of traits and activities that are in domination-oriented cultures unacceptable in men because they are stereotypically associated with “inferior” femininity. These traits become more highly valued in, and by, both men and women. So along with the higher status of women in the Nordic world, came fiscal priorities that support more stereotypically “feminine” values and activities.

As I detail in my book *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, these more partnership-oriented nations pioneered caregiving policies such as government-supported childcare, universal health care, and paid parental leave. As a result of these more stereotypically “feminine” caregiving policies, these countries, which earlier suffered from extreme poverty – including severe famines that led to waves of immigration to the United States – became prosperous. This contradicts still another reason sometimes given for more humane Nordic social policies: that these policies were due to greater prosperity. In reality, these policies were the cause, not effect, of greater prosperity.

Nordic nations also pioneered laws prohibiting violence against children in families. They have a strong men’s movement against male violence toward women. They pioneered nonviolent conflict resolution and established the first peace studies programs. They pioneered environmentally sound manufacturing approaches; for example, the “Natural Step,” where materials are recycled even after they reach the consumer to avoid pollution and waste. And their educational systems give children far more individual attention and freedom – accounting in large part for the fact that their high school students regularly score high in international achievement tests.

These are *not* coincidental developments. They are all outcomes of the fact that the core configuration of the Nordic world orients much more to the partnership side of the partnership-domination continuum.

Partnership Education

Obviously education for domination systems and partnership systems is very different. So in my book *Tomorrow’s Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century* I set out to apply my findings to education.

As educators know, there are three primary elements in education: process (how we learn and teach), structure (the learning environment); and content or curriculum (what we learn and teach).

Partnership process is about *how* we learn and teach. It applies the guiding template of the partnership model to educational *methods* and *techniques*. Are young people treated with caring and respect? Do teachers act as primarily lesson-dispensers and controllers, or more as mentors and facilitators? Are young people learning to work together or must they continuously compete with each other? Are they offered the opportunity for self-directed learning? In short, is education merely a matter of teachers inserting “information” into young people’s minds, or are students and teachers partners in a meaningful adventure of exploration and learning?

Partnership structure is about *where* learning and teaching take place: what kind of *learning environment* we construct. Is the structure of a school, classroom, and/or home school one of top-down authoritarian rankings, or is it a more democratic one? Do students, teachers, and other staff participate in school decision-making and rule-setting? Diagramed on an organizational chart, would decisions flow only from the top down and accountability only from the bottom up, or would there be interactive feedback loops? In short, is the learning environment organized in terms of hierarchies of domination ultimately backed up by fear, or is it a combination of horizontal linkings and hierarchies of actualization where power is not used to disempower but to empower?

Partnership content is *what* we learn and teach. It is the *educational curriculum*. Does the curriculum effectively teach students not only basic academic and vocational skills but also the life-skills they need to be competent and caring citizens, workers, parents, and community members? Are we telling young people to be responsible, kind, and nonviolent at the same time that the curriculum content still celebrates male violence and conveys environmentally unsustainable and socially irresponsible messages? Does it present science in holistic, relevant ways? Does what is taught as important knowledge and truth include – not just as an add-on, but as integral to what is learned – both the female and male halves of humanity as well as children of various races and ethnicities? Does it teach young people the difference between the partnership and domination systems as two basic human possibilities and the feasibility of creating a partnership way of life? Or, both overtly and covertly, is this presented as unrealistic

in "the real world"? In short, what kind of view of ourselves, our world, and our roles and responsibilities in it are young people taking away from their schooling?

Much of progressive education has focused primarily on process, and to some degree on structure. This is very important. But partnership education is not only a matter of more self-directed learning, peer teaching, cooperative learning, more individualized assessment tools, and other partnership pedagogies. Nor is it only a matter of a more democratic and participatory structure. It emphasizes the importance of narratives, and very specifically what kinds of behaviors and values are presented as valuable in curriculum narratives.

One of the goals of progressive education is to give young people more choices. Yet even in many progressive schools the curriculum offers few alternative narratives. At best it does so in bits and pieces, mostly as add-ons to conventional narratives we inherited from earlier more domination-oriented times. So all too often there is a conflict between the worldviews and values progressive educators talk about and try to model, and the implicit, and even explicit, messages of the narratives or stories that both consciously and unconsciously mold what people consider normal and desirable. For this reason, attention to narratives is a major component of partnership education.

On all sides young people see and hear stories that portray us as bad, cruel, violent, and selfish. Video games and action adventure movies and TV shows present violence as the way to solve problems. Situation comedies make insensitivity, rudeness, and cruelty seem funny. Cartoons present violence as exciting, funny, and without real consequences. As in the journalistic motto of "if it bleeds, it leads," even the stories that make top headlines focus on the infliction and/or suffering of pain as the most significant and newsworthy human events.

Rather than correcting this false image of what it means to be human, much of what children still learn in schools reinforce it. Not only do history curricula still emphasize battles and wars, but classics such as Homer's *Iliad* and Shakespeare's kings trilogy romanticize "heroic violence." And scientific stories tell children that we are the puppets of "selfish genes" ruthlessly competing on the evolutionary stage.

If we are inherently violent, bad, and selfish, we have to be strictly controlled. This is why stories that claim this is "human nature" are central to an education for a domination

system. They are, however, inappropriate if young people are to learn to live in a democratic, peaceful, equitable, and Earth-honoring way.

This is why I included in *Tomorrow's Children* a panoply of curriculum components. These components are woven into a coherent curriculum loom and learning tapestry for those who want a whole-systems approach. But they are also intended for teaching in all kinds of settings, providing materials that can be integrated into existing curricula.

A major focus throughout *Tomorrow's Children* is a more gender-balanced curriculum. Most of what children are taught is still extremely male-centered, from textbook illustrations of primate and human evolution with only male figures to how the canon in just about every field (from art to science) primarily features males. This marginalization, and often invisibility, of the female half of humanity perpetuates domination systems. A male-superior/female-inferior model of our species is a template for learning to associate difference – beginning with the most basic difference between male and female – with superiority or inferiority, dominating or being dominated, being served or serving. This is a template that can then be applied to different races, religions, ethnicities, and so forth – which is why, for example, regressive regimes or would be regimes (such as so-called religious fundamentalists) focus so heavily on “getting women back into their traditional or subservient place.

A major theme running through partnership education is providing young people the analytical lenses of the partnership-domination continuum to make sense of what otherwise seems random and disconnected. For instance, all the progressive modern social movements have challenged traditions of domination – from the “rights of man,” feminist, abolitionist, and economic justice movements of the 18th and 19th centuries to the 20th century peace, environmental, and women’s rights movements, to the continuing struggle for human rights, including the rights of women and children. As young people understand these connections they too can make a difference in promoting the cultural transformation from domination to partnership.

My hope, and goal, is that adapted for different regions and cultures, partnership education can be a blueprint for refocusing, reframing, and redesigning education to help children grow up to be active agents of social transformation. We must use education to show our children that a partnership future is not a *utopia* or no place, but a *pragmatopia*, a possible

place – and we must teach them the knowledge and skills they need to build partnership cultures worldwide.

RIANE EISLER is a social scientist, attorney, and social activist best known as author of the international bestseller *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future*, now in 23 languages. Her newest book, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* has been hailed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as “a template for the better world we have been so urgently seeking,” by Gloria Steinem as “revolutionary,” by Peter Senge as “desperately needed,” and by Jane Goodall as “a call for action.” Her earlier books include the award-winning *Tomorrow’s Children* and *The Power of Partnership*, as well as *Sacred Pleasure*, a daring reexamination of sexuality and spirituality, and *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life*, documenting the key role of women’s status in a nation’s general quality of life. Dr. Eisler is co-founder of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (www.saiiv.net) and president of the Center for Partnership Studies (www.partnershipway.org). She teaches partnership studies in the transformative leadership graduate degree program at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), keynotes conferences worldwide, and is a consultant to business and government on applications of the partnership model introduced in her work. She has received many honors, and is included in the award-winning book *Great Peacemakers*, as one of 20 leaders for world peace, along with Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King.

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