

From the Editor

John F. Covalesskie
University of Oklahoma

For the second issue in a row, I sit down to the task of commenting on some very interesting scholarly work while trying to bracket the scope of the evil individuals can visit on our communities. I was preparing the Winter issue for publication in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook murders. This Spring issue is going to press shortly after the carnage at the Boston Marathon. How can an imperial and commercialized society that loves violence more than its children even begin to realize that violence and empire are educational questions that desperately need to be taken seriously?

As Nel Noddings, Vivian Paley, Jane Roland Martin, Deborah Meier and so many other educators and educational theorists remind us, education, whatever else it is, must be an act of hospitality from one generation to another. It must seek to develop and enhance the nobility in humanity. How do we do that when, whatever else is true of schooling in the United States today, it is implacably hostile to children and to childhood, with every indication that policy-makers intend to make it more and more rigidly so in the future.

In the midst of an “education reform” movement that seems designed to punish educators and dehumanize students, the inclusion of what are called the social and/or cultural foundations of education are more important than ever. The fact that serious discussion about the social and cultural purposes of education threatens the hijacking of educational institutions by corporate interests may explain their marginalization. Barbara Thayer-Bacon’s open letter to her Dean and

department heads puts forth an argument in support of the essential work that social and cultural foundations do and reminds us that being human means something more than producing and consuming. As institutions of higher education (especially public institutions of higher education) come more under the sway of their corporate sponsors, it will do us all well to remember that “A nation that does not have citizens who are knowledgeable about their past, understand their cultural roots, are able to analyze their social institutions, and able to make an argument for what should be on the grounds of justice, care, beauty, truth, and goodness is a nation that cannot hope to be a democracy someday.” This is the job of the foundations disciplines, and they have perhaps never been more important.

To get some sense of how deep the conceptual hole we are in is, we need look no further than the next essay, Brenda McMahon’s “Conflicting Conceptions of the Purposes of Schooling in a Democracy.” In this phenomenological study of the purposes of education as constructed by twelve principals, “Examples of democratic practices were largely absent,” with one central office administrator going so far as to say, “Why would you want to interview principals about democracy? Democracy has nothing to do with schools. They do what we tell them to do.” As a statement of the central problem facing democratic education today, I just cannot do better than that.

Not just principals, but perhaps even more so, teachers are disempowered in the current regime of education for the GDP. Craig Shepherd and Michael Hannafin’s “Reframing Portfolio Evidence: Empowering Teachers Through Single-Case Frameworks” suggests that one way to give teachers more ability to shape their practice is to provide professional development that will allow teachers to be serious students and critics of their own practice. Done properly, this can allow teachers a greater voice in creating a more valuable method of formative evaluation that both serves as a critical examination of practice but also helps form public norms about the nature and purposes of good teaching.

Finally, we come to Jeremy Kopkas’s “Is the Casting of Utilitarian as Discordant with Arts Education Philosophy Justified?” His interesting argument is that to construct utility as merely crass usefulness is to narrow the meaning of utilitarian too far, while at the same time divorcing the arts from practical engagement in the fashioning of a good life. Utilitarianism, Kopkas reminds us, is originally a theory of ethics, and has to do with happiness, not profit. The arts, by implication, have ethical, not just aesthetic, value, and they are useful in fashioning a good life. I have been much reminded this week of Leonard Bernstein’s comments two days after the murder of John F. Kennedy: “This will be

our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.” I think this is consistent with what Kopkas is saying: The arts are not just beautiful, though they may be that as well. They are, perhaps more importantly, useful to us as we seek meaning in the face of what seems sometimes like a senseless world.

There is much work to be done in the effort to make education a human endeavor, not a technocratic economic servant of corporate interests. Education, it has been argued since Thomas Jefferson, can make democratic life possible. Educators, as both George Counts and John Dewey argued, are among the main individuals on whom this task both falls and depends. We are in danger of losing this battle against the forces of dehumanization and darkness. In different ways, our authors in this issue point out signs of our precarious position and ways that we might gain some ground toward that democratic ideal. We perhaps can never end violence, and we can certainly never prevent the mad among us from wreaking havoc. But we might, we just might, be able to create the conditions in which democracy can survive, even perhaps thrive, in the face of various forms of madness.

After all, it is well to remember that when the bombs went off, instead of running for safety, hundreds of ordinary citizens raced toward the explosion to offer aid and comfort to the wounded and dying. One could, I suppose, consider this a different form of madness, and we might then be optimistic about the fact that it is far more the common. The ghost of Leonard Bernstein is, I suspect, pleased.