

# SCHOOLING, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE

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## ABSTRACT

This article illuminates modern social phenomena and their impact on schools, teachers and administrators. Global trends, such as globalization, neo-liberalism and new public management, are among those discussed. A 'thinking tool' developed by the author and colleagues is presented and explained. This model depicts how the major social institutions of the state, business/commerce, and civil society (e.g., established religions) interact to affect schooling, and the individual student, teacher, and administrator. Relative tolerance of nations (and, by implication, the tolerance shown by social institutions such as schools) and the ontological security of individuals are proposed as positive counterbalances to the negative effects of some of the social trends mentioned.

**KEY WORDS:** Schooling, the state, administration, tolerance, globalization.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo nos muestra un moderno fenómeno social y su impacto en las escuelas, los maestros y los administradores. Tendencias mundiales, como lo es la globalización, neoliberalismo y la nueva administración pública, son entre otras las que se discuten aquí. Una “herramienta pensante” desarrollada por el autor y sus colegas es presentada y explicada. Este modelo representa cómo las principales instituciones del Estado, negocios/comercio y la sociedad civil (por ejemplo, las religiones establecidas), interactúan de modo que afectan la educación, y al estudiante individual, los maestros y administradores. La relativa tolerancia de las naciones (y, por ende, la tolerancia mostrada por las instituciones sociales como las escuelas) y la seguridad ontológica de las personas es propuesta como un contrapeso positivo a los efectos negativos de algunas tendencias sociales mencionadas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Educación, Estado, Administración, Tolerancia, Globalización.

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## Introduction

The world is changing, and changing rapidly and in fundamental ways. We educators cannot afford to ignore this. We can no longer be satisfied with only looking inward to the life of our classrooms, but must be cognizant of the world outside our classrooms and how that affects us. We need to be aware of the changes abroad both for pedagogical reasons and for political ones. Examples of Some Trends: Globalization, Neo-Liberalism and New Public Management

Some of the world-wide trends occurring involve the nature of our existence and that of our social systems. For example, global warming has come to be an accepted phenomenon. We are fast becoming aware of the impact human activity in far-flung places has upon our own locale. Pollution in China finds its way to the United States. Dust blowing off the Gobi Desert can be tracked and its effects on weather in the Americas can be mapped. Global international travel and communication connects us as never before. The internet and email allow us to monitor happenings such as the Buddhist monk uprising in Myanmar (Burma) from our laptops and personal computers. (Photos of these events were captured and transmitted by cell phone cameras, making ordinary citizens frontline journalists—a decidedly democratic turn.) A new generation has been weaned on instant and text messaging by internet and cell phone. Even in heretofore remote places, people of every social class have cell phones and stay in touch with a network of others—relations and acquaintances—on a daily basis. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) permit those with ready access to chart the changes in sea levels around the globe and to pinpoint their and others' locations with uncanny accuracy, among its other uses.

News and views travel the internet, cable television and the 'blogosphere' nearly instantaneously. These media and their related technologies hold the promise of democratizing communication and, perhaps, affording more and more people a voice in policy making and other aspects of government.

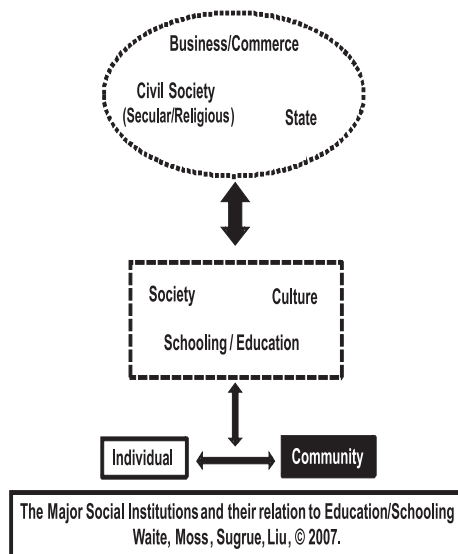
Social changes can no longer be isolated, but spread quickly. Throughout the Western world, neo-liberalism and New Public Management have taken root, and this affects social systems in all countries, to a greater or lesser degree.

Some aspects of these orientations toward public policy have infiltrated even more closed societies (capitalism in China, for example). The interconnectedness of global systems means that, for instance, manufacturers in China, and elsewhere, must concern themselves with product safety and even the perception of it or its perceived lack; and multinational conglomerates in the West must, in turn, pay heed to how their policies, preferences and public proclamations affect those who provide the manufactured goods that they purvey. Each scratches the other's back.

## A Tool to Think With

My colleagues and I have developed an ersatz model (Figure 1.) as a thinking tool to help us begin to think about how, in this case, the major social institutional forces of the state, business/commerce, and civil society (especially, organized religious institutions) interact in dynamic fashion. (They do so in particular fashion in each and every specific society and locale, based, in part, upon historical antecedents and prevailing ideologies, epistemologies and cultures.)

Figure 1. Major Social Institutional Forces in Interaction



Based on a presentation to Egitimciler Birliği Sendikası/Eğitim-Bir-Sen, Ankara, The Republic of Turkey, December 1, 2007.

Our concern, primarily, is how these forces play out and affect education/schooling. Elsewhere (Waite, Moos, Sugrue, & Liu, in press), we detail some specific cases or examples of these forces at play and the impact that dynamic has for education. Briefly, we posit that, though always in dynamic interaction, historical epochs have been marked by the dominance of one of these major social institutions or another, but that each is always present and its effects felt, to a greater or lesser degree.

To us, it appears as though a more business-oriented ontology or world-view has taken hold globally. Business as a field (Bourdieu, 1998) has infiltrated the other fields. A field, in Bourdieu's terms is characterized, among other things, by the language and modes of thought particular to each field, usually at taken-for-granted, unconscious levels. Business language and thought have taken up residence in the field of education. Education is rife with business-like actuarial modes of thinking. The adoption of forms of New Public Management in education, especially educational management and administration, causes all types of educators—not just administrators, but teachers as well—to think in terms of, for instance, accountability, where, in New Public Management terms, this is conceived of solely in quantitative and quantifiable terms. This, then, becomes the accepted, unquestioned, taken-for-granted regimen—the way things are and ought to be.

It appears to us that one global trend that deeply affects education is a movement toward technicist and utilitarian-type thinking. This is confounded by a consumerist mentality. The combination of these dispositions results in the commodification of education/learning. Students are more apt to think of education as a consumer relationship with utilitarian purposes: What can I, the student, get for my money that will help me in my career or, in other words, to earn more money? Students, especially at the university level, become consumers rather than learners. Education for education's sake does not usually enter into the equation. Take for example on-line classes and degrees. A recent *USA Today* (November 28, 2007) article reports that, in the US, there are fully one hundred (100) purely on-line degree-granting institutions. Those students who participate in this type of, I hesitate to call it education, but credentialing, often cite convenience as a reason for preferring

on-line courses and programs. Students also look at cost, opting for on-line courses, at least in the US, because they often cost half as much as a degree from a conventional brick-and-mortar university.

### **The Negative Aspects of Business-Like Thinking in Education**

The type of consumerism, technicist thinking and commercialism we are seeing more of in education has many negative aspects. One of the negative sides to such a disposition toward education is that it fundamentally alters the relationship between, first, a student and his/her learning, and, second, between the student and the teacher. It denigrates the student. Here's how: Relationships are two-sided. For a student to enter into a business transaction, or to make his/her educational decisions purely on economic considerations, the student is reduced to a client, a customer, and is no longer simply a student. A parallel can be drawn here between a student-as-client relationship and that of a client of a prostitute: This business relationship cheapens both parties, and sullies an otherwise beautiful act. The teacher-student relationship is sacrosanct. Teachers form unique relationships with students, a relationship no one else can approximate. The school administrator doesn't share the type of relationship with a student that the teacher does. Listen to the language of administrators. They speak of *servicing* students. They think in terms of programs that serve students, often large number of students. What does this say about the relationship an administrator has with a student when they speak of serving them? Do parents talk of serving their children? Do spouses speak of serving the other? Do friends talk of serving friends? No, but administrators speak in these terms. This type of language belies the artificial or distant relationship other educators (administrators and bureaucrats, even 'educrats'—those state-level bureaucrats who call themselves educators) have with the student. On the contrary, teachers *teach* students. The state has an even more distant relationship with the students it is responsible for educating. I suggest that only the teacher has an immediate and altruistic relationship with a student. But these relationships are not immune from corruption, such as when teachers are asked or sometimes coerced to treat students in ways that are contrary to their students' best interests; for example, in force-feeding students the minugia

and superficial, low-level skills that they are then expected to regurgitate on most, if not all, high-stakes accountability tests. Teachers and schools become corrupt when they abuse their relationship with the student.

The business/commerce model or field has other dark sides, many of which we willfully ignore because we are seduced by the language of a free market. One dark side of business, and one that even creeps into education, is that of corruption—a phenomenon my colleagues and I have written about extensively (Waite & Allen, 2003; Waite & Waite, in press). There are many types of corruption, two of these types are *state capture* (where businesses and their agents manipulate policy and legislation and the legislative process for gain) and *venal corruption* (where the state manipulates business, the market or business-related policies for its own ends). John Dewey, the American philosopher, wrote: “Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?” (1916, p. 97). The corruption Dewey wrote of is a type of venal corruption, wherein the state corrupts the educative process for its own, sometimes ideological ends.

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Corruption is a cancer upon society, robbing people of their monies and disillusioning them as regards the motives of the state. Citizens who suffer the oppression of corrupt systems lose faith in the state and its willingness and ability to see to their welfare—a fundamental obligation of any state, but essential to those that claim to be democratic. The New York Times (Fisher, 2007) notes how Italians have fallen into a national malaise, due, in part, to their frustration with each of the three major social institutions of our model—the state, business, and Italian civil society. The report details how Italians are frustrated with entrenched political parties and unresponsive political processes. They sense that, economically, they are being passed by more recent entrants to the European Union, such as Spain, and that their economy has stagnated. A recent report (The Associated Press, October 22, 2007) notes how organized crime is now the biggest business in Italy. Another (The Christian Science Monitor, May 23, 2006) notes how corruption is a bigger problem in Afghanistan than even the Taliban. Corrupt governments and systems are, by definition, undemocratic, for they operate through coercion

and force and only the few benefit. (In Mexico, the saying is: “*plata o plomo*” –silver or lead; implying, that if someone doesn't accept a bribe, they will be killed.) In Jiangxi Province in China recently, as many as forty school children were killed in an explosion at a primary school, where teachers were forcing children to assemble fireworks to profit the teachers, the school, and local party officials (see Waite & Allen, 2003); this even after parents complained to local party officials about the practice. Examples of corrupt schooling practices, both individual and systemic, abound in the US as well (Waite & Allen, 2003), not the least of which is administrators—principals and district superintendents, even state and national educational bureaucrats—who profit and enjoy career advancement when they can get the students under their charge to perform well on state high-stakes tests, and, in the process, make their reputation on the backs of those children. An unfortunate outcome of the drive to raise student achievement scores on high stakes tests at nearly any cost is that such a narrow focus deprives these students of a fuller, richer education. Test scores become a proxy for education, just as school becomes a simulacra, a shadow play, where each party does his part in acting out the school drama, performing his/her role 'doing schooling.' This is what school has come to, in many cases, as a result of the business model, neo-liberalist thought and New Public Management practices being applied to education.

### Counterbalances for Educators

All is not lost. Although each epoch, place and time may be dominated by one or another of the major social institutional forces I've outlined—and even by a dominant psychological feeling, psyche, attitude, or ontology—there is always everywhere a dynamic interaction among active and latent forces. Everything is contested and contestable. Everything is in flux.

Teachers, leaders interested in supporting teachers in their work, and those of us who embrace the future and who want to fashion a future that is more hospitable for us, our children and our students might consider undertaking these relatively simple steps:

- Work on the world as a sociologist, as a philosopher;
- Work for transparency in our organizations and institutions;

- Practice tolerance;
- Teach tolerance;
- Promote self-determination and interdependency;
- Foster ontological security (in yourself and your students);
- Build and nurture relationships, for they are the heart of teaching and of us as human beings;
- Love and respect one another;
- Be sure in your mission, for our children depend on us;
- Be strong; and
- Be courageous.

Though the developed world seems to be moving toward what Inglehart (2003) terms postmodern values (actually, the modernist values of self-expression, human rights, and so on), those same developed and developing societies are experiencing a push-back from more conservative traditional forces. This push-back is a reactionary movement, often occasioned by an ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1990) on the part of those who are threatened by change. The rise of fundamentalism, both in whole countries and in enclaves and sectors of developed countries (e.g., fundamentalist Christian religious/political movements in the US, the rise of ultranationalist movements in Russia and elsewhere across Europe, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan), can be seen as a reaction to progressive movements in those countries and worldwide. The furor and hate-speak of the anti-immigrant movements in the US, Europe and elsewhere are but examples of a reactionary response to social changes by less secure, more conservative people.

### **Sociological and Philosophical Thinking**

Bourdieu (1998, p. 29) wrote that “thought, by definition, is subversive.” He encouraged people to challenge received ideas. Teachers need both to engage in thinking and teach and/or encourage their students to think. One way to do this is through social critique—the application of sociological and philosophical thought to contemporary social states, conditions and issues.

Sociological and philosophical thought ought to result in the unmasking of oppressive systems and systems of corruption and those who are likely to benefit from corruption. Louis Brandeis,

an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court from 1916-1939, wrote that “sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants” (Wikipedia, 2007), meaning transparency keeps our institutions healthy. Any member of an organization (and we are all members of more and more organizations), teachers especially, ought to insist on transparency in those organizations. Transparency is an important component of democracy.

### **Tolerance**

Amy Chua (2007) describes what makes a superpower, or, in her words, a hyper-power or hegemon. In addition to accidents having to do with geography, climate, resources and so on, Chua finds that all the world’s hyper-powers—from Cyrus the Great, to Alexander the Great, to Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire, to the Tang Empire in China, to the Roman Empire, to the Dutch state in the 1500s, the British Empire and, now, to the US as a hyper-power—had this in common: All practiced strategic tolerance. That is, the Mongols, the Dutch and the rest, welcomed people of diverse religious faiths and ethnicities. One nation’s relative tolerance vis a vis other nations served as a magnet for talent. This allowed these nations to blossom. Chau also finds that a rise of intolerance within super-powers coincides with its decline as a world power. She cites the example of the Spanish Inquisition as a social/political movement that kept Spain from assuming the mantle of a global, world dominant power; just as the conversion of the Roman Empire to the Holy Roman Empire with Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and the resulting persecution of, for example, Jews and off-shoot Christian groups and others (pagans and polytheists, for example), precipitated the fall of the Holy Roman Empire. Chua notes how the church, state and the commercial sphere interact in producing social conditions of relative tolerance or its opposite, intolerance.

In schools, as in society at large, tolerance is essential to prosperity—to the realization of the full potential of the individual and of society. In our model (Figure 1.), tolerance within and among the major social institutions would affect schools and schooling. As they are in dynamic relation, tolerance taught, learned and practiced in school should affect the other major social institutions as well. Teachers have a professional, ethical obligation to practice



tolerance and to teach it. This is an activist stance teachers can take.

### Fostering Ontological Security

It is an open question as to whether one can teach ontological security or whether it is simply an innate personality trait. It may be that some people come by it naturally, and some might never experience it, as it's simply not in their nature. Regardless, ontological security can perhaps be learned, if not taught. Teachers and other school leaders might attend to the development of their ontological security: It makes dealing with change that much easier, less stressful. Teachers might do what they can to foster ontological security in their students. Those who are ontologically secure experiment and take more risks; those who are not tend to be more conservative, risk averse. Growth, learning, and change are all different terms for the same phenomenon. (School improvement is, for our discussion here, one such type of change that would benefit from increased ontological security on the part of teachers and administrators.) Fear and insecurity are the enemies of growth and development. Teachers and other leaders ought to work to banish fear from their lives, their classrooms and their schools.

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### Fostering Pedagogical Relationships

All pedagogy is relational and all relationships are pedagogical. Teaching is a sacred trust. Teachers are in a unique position, one that comes with an obligation. Each and every one of us inhabits a unique position, owing to our biography, culture, psychology, and dispositions, among other attributes. Each and every one of us has a unique perspective and voice. Only we can speak from our unique position; others cannot do it for us. Because of this and the special obligation we have as teachers, as educators, *we must champion our cause*—that is, the wellbeing of our students. A recent policy by the German government limiting the work of Scientologists there bases its position on the determination that the group “seeks to limit or rescind basic and human rights, such as the right to develop one's personality and the right to be treated equally” (Eddy, 2007, A5). Teachers must protect their own right to develop their personality, just as they protect those same rights for their students. When the state, business or the agents of the civil

society (e.g., religions) encroach upon those rights, teachers and other educators should be among the first to raise the alarm and muster the appropriate resistance.

### Be Courageous

None of this is easy. Change is difficult. But having companionship along the way helps with the difficult work of teaching and leading for change and social justice.

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