

Another Education Is Happening



By Julia Pointer Putnam

The mainstream media has created the myth that community people are waiting for Superman, the White House, or state-appointed Emergency Financial Managers to resolve the escalating crises in our schools. The truth is that concerned parents and citizens, especially in deindustrialized cities like Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia, are beginning to resolve this crisis by making a paradigm shift in the U.S. concept of education. John Dewey, this country's most important social philosopher, advocated this paradigm shift many years ago. His vision of a more democratic educational system was widely known and discussed prior to the Second World War. But as long as U.S. industry was flourishing, it was marginalized. The U.S. educational system, Dewey explained, is too top-down. It is undemocratic. It disempowers children, stifles their natural tendencies to explore, to manipulate tools, and to construct and create. It is a sorting mechanism with standards, goals, tests, and sordid comparisons, rooted in an attitude of acquisitiveness or the capitalist ethos. It separates the school and schoolchildren from the community. The following article by Julia Pointer Putnam tells the story of how the deindustrialization of Detroit has made Dewey's more democratic view of education an idea whose time has come.

—Grace Lee Boggs

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Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. Martin Luther King, Jr. wondered this about himself and his fellow clergymen in 1963, when they gathered to express their opposition to the war in Vietnam. King called for a revolution in values, imploring the nation to move from a "thing-oriented" to a "people-oriented" society.

The postindustrial decline that began in the 1970s and left Detroit reeling also provided its citizens the opportunity to redefine our humanity. With a school drop-out rate of 55 percent and climbing, we had to ask ourselves: Do we assume that half of our kids are lazy delinquents, or do we assume that they are voting with their feet against the oppressive conditions in their schools? While for many, the conversation around education has turned to controlling, punitive, and test-driven solutions, others are choosing to empower our children and involve them in efforts to transform the city. Having started in 1992 with the Detroit Summer program, educators throughout Detroit continue to create and put forth a new vision of education that views the city as a community that has something to teach its children. Schools are seen as an important component of this larger community. The strength and potential of young people is celebrated. This vision stands in stark contrast to the dominant conception of education.

For most people today, unfortunately, school is a building, separate from the neighborhood, where children are seen as blank slates or empty heads to fill up with factual information, arbitrarily chosen by executives and administrations with a misguided sense of how real children develop, think, and grow. In her book, *The Next American Revolution*, longtime community activist, Grace Lee Boggs, presents a radically different vision of education, of schools as part of a community and as part of social development: Just imagine how safe and lively our streets would be, if, as a natural and normal part of the curriculum from K-12, school children were taking responsibility for maintaining neighborhood streets, planting community gardens, recycling waste, rehabbing houses, creating healthier school lunches, visiting and doing errands for the elderly, organizing neighborhood festivals, painting public murals.... This is the fastest way to motivate all our children to

learn and at the same time turn our communities, almost overnight, into lively neighborhoods where crime is going down because hope is going up.

Grace advocates a type of learning known as Place-Based Education (or Community-Based Education), where the local community and environment serve as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. This approach diminishes the boundaries that have been built up between schools and the community. Place-Based Education emphasizes the ability of young people to learn by addressing the real-life problems around them.

This community approach is quite different from the way we think of school today, when the general message is that children go to school to get a job or to advance their *individual* fortunes. Education is limited to youth, who are socialized to view the world as a competitive market. We fail to recognize how this system has created generation after generation of adults who are ill prepared to approach our mounting societal problems with true creativity or with an idea toward the collective. We need to give children a better reason to study than simply to get a job or advance individual wealth. Children need to develop a desire, even a passion, for lifelong learning. They need to learn to read and write with the purpose of communicating their ideas with people in their neighborhoods, their country, and the world. They need to learn about themselves in order to understand their identities and how those identities mesh with others in society. Their lives should be enriched through investment in the community. They need to understand how to be truly connected to others in an age of mounting technologies that offer a mere illusion of connection. They need practice in making smart, thoughtful decisions, so that when it is their turn to run the country, they understand the delicate intricacies of resolving conflicts, while creating a world that works for all. We cannot expect good leadership from people who have never been given the opportunity to lead and who have never felt or been empowered. We cannot expect people who have been trained to believe they have no responsibility to the people around them to be good neighbors. We cannot expect people who have been trained to sit idly by while others make decisions to be good citizens. As Detroit poet Will Copeland explains, we need meaning-makers, not meaning-takers.

My Detroit Summer Story

In 1992, I was sixteen and a junior at Renaissance High School, which is considered, even today, one of the finest high schools in the city. Academically, I was doing well; I was one of those kids who knew how to “do” school. But I was miserable. I lived in a city that everyone described as a crumbling cesspool, and I could not understand why this was so. I also did not understand what I should do about it. The answer presented to me was unsatisfying—get good grades, go to college, and get a high-paying job so that I could leave Detroit and all its problems behind for someone else. One day during lunch, my friend Mary told me about a couple named Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs who visited her class. They left a flyer, “The Call to Detroit Summer.” It explained that in every significant social movement in our country, young people had been the defining factor. They needed young people who were willing to take on the challenge of revitalizing, redefining, and respiration Detroit from the ground up. I had not even known that I craved being asked to do something important until I was actually asked.

During the three-week span of the first Detroit Summer, we immersed ourselves in the community. We planted urban gardens, painted murals, and helped rehab a house for an elderly woman. We held peace vigils downtown every week with Save Our Sons and Daughters to acknowledge the young people who had been lost to gun violence. We marched against crack houses in the neighborhood with We the People Protect Our Streets. We participated in intergenerational dialogues where elders came to open up their lives like textbooks and then let *us* ask questions. Young people often facilitated these events, so the discussions were actual dialogues instead of lectures. The conversations were lively, informative, and a highlight. They helped connect different generations within the community. These activities and the process of engaging in community projects that improve the neighborhoods we were in during those three weeks made Detroit Summer the first manifestation of Place-Based Education in the city.

This Place-Based educational process can change social relationships and enrich a community. For instance, we worked that first year on a garden across the street from where a Mrs. Thomas lived. Mrs. Thomas made lunch for us volunteers every day without fail—I still remember her peas. One time, she let us know that she used to be afraid of young people, but that we had restored her hope in our generation. Nothing was more important to me at the time than proving that my generation cared about what was going on in the world. No school had figured out how to tap into that part of me that wanted to make a difference. Detroit Summer was the only outlet for what I considered the best part of myself. I became an active citizen during those years because I was given examples of how I could positively impact the conditions in the city.

Five Teachers

Ten years after the first Detroit Summer, I was working as a teacher. Thanks to my experience with Detroit Summer, I already knew that I loved working with teenagers. I modeled my teaching style both on my own memories of feeling disaffected as a teen and on the adults in Detroit Summer who never failed to take me seriously. Nevertheless, I found myself becoming increasingly annoyed with my students. Why were they not motivated? Why were they not curious? Why was I more interested in their education than they were? Why was the dropout rate so high, when teachers worked hard every day to engage their students?

Seeking advice and a fresh perspective, I went to talk to Grace. She reminded me that schools were still operating from the factory model paradigm and that in order to get better, they would need to meet students where they are today. She also asked me to consider the idea that the dropout rate could be a sign that students who understood the contradiction between what they were learning in school and its relevance to their daily lives were actually “opting out” of a system they knew was not serving them. In many ways, there were no alternatives for those kids. Grace encouraged me to attend Freedom School meetings at her home (which has since become the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership) to discuss these ideas with other teachers. At these meetings, educators came together to explore the paradigm in education, to help it shift from the factory model to one that fits the modern needs of families. There, I met Nate Walker, a teacher from Connecticut, who came to Detroit with the Teach for America program. He came, hoping to make a difference, and soon realized that he was most often praised for being a good teacher when his students were sitting still, exactly what Nate himself hated about school as a child. He and his friend Francis Donner (also from Teach for America) constantly discussed what it meant to educate children well. I also met Amanda Rosman, a teacher, new mom, and law school student. Al DeFreece, a sociology student at the University of Michigan, also attended these meetings. He was interested in how young people develop a racial identity. Eventually, the five of us started meeting weekly to figure out how we might create a school that embodied the ideas we discussed at the Boggs Center.

We began in 2008 with the question: What should kids know? We then started to dream about a person, who, having been at our school for twelve years, now appeared in a graduation gown. What kind of person did we want standing before us? We imagined that the person would not only be academically competent but also knowledgeable at practical skills. She or he would feel comfortable opening up a toaster, for instance, and trying to fix it before thinking that it must be thrown out and replaced. He or she would know how to create something from scratch, either a meal or a piece of clothing or an original piece of music. She or he would not only be able to love, but also to receive love from others. He or she would be able to mediate conflict in life. She or he would know how to be civically engaged in politics, grow food in a garden. Most of all, she or he would be happy.

We also acknowledged that *we* wanted to be happy. We not only imagined kids walking to school and, on their way, passing their neighbors who would know them by name. We also imagined a place where *we* could walk or bike. We wanted a place where we could send our kids and work with our friends. We wanted to create a community for ourselves as well as our students. Our goal was to create an experience that increased the humanity in us all.

Loving Them Up

Recently, a mother told me about her painful divorce. She and her son had lost everything, and they had to move from Chicago to her parents' home in Ann Arbor. She was shocked to see her traumatized son, once under his grandparents' roof, thrive. He even experienced a sizeable growth spurt. The grandparents' explanation was that they simply “loved the boy up.”

In the same way, so many young people—myself included—describe our experience in Detroit Summer. The reality of my single mom's life is that, though she loved her children fiercely, she was also exhausted and overwhelmed. Many of the youth volunteers' parents did not have their own transportation. So the adult volunteers in Detroit Summer gladly drove us all around the city. Over the years, so many people have touched my life. I learned how to garden from Gerald Hairston (“It's not dirt, it's soil!”). I listened to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech in its entirety for the first time on the King Day march while riding with Rich Feldman. Shea Howell provided endless encouragement, prefacing everything I did with a cheerful, “You'll do great!” Grace put the whole of Detroit's history in a contextual timeline that helped me understand why the city looked so scarred. Eden Winter's backyard was home to countless Detroit Summer closing ceremonies, and I will forever associate it with barbecue and a sense of carefree satisfaction. Michelle Brown came to pick me up to visit Jimmy when it was clear that he only had a few more days to live. When I thanked Jimmy for being so kind to me, he squeezed my hand.

A group of diverse adults with more skill sets and interests than she could ever compile herself helped my mom raise me. There were always people available and happy to help her love me up. In this time of economic hardship and diminished community resources, most parents are doing the best they can, just to keep their children housed, clothed, and fed. The necessary energy needed to read stories, help with homework, and volunteer at school are considered a luxury that most working parents cannot afford. As a mother of two small children, I understand the excessive amount of patience kids require. I also know that I cannot always provide the unconditional love that all kids deserve. How wonderful would it be if our schools were a place where parents could send their children, knowing that not only would they learn basic skills, but they would also be loved up by all the people in the community, who offered them a variety of skills and experience? When Nate, Frank, Amanda, Al, and I were discussing the school we wanted to create, we asked one another what made us each feel successful. All of us had academic degrees, yet not one of us listed them as the reason for our success. I know for sure that my success comes not from any of the academic goals I have met but because I was surrounded by adults who took an interest in me. They were there to answer my questions, expose me to ideas and experiences that I may not have known otherwise, and care for me as a person. These are the same people who love my children now as they loved me then. This community that chose to help raise me without once undermining my mother's authority or love is the reason I am where I am today. Families in cities across the country are hungry for this type of community support, for the type of school where kids are useful, where hope goes up as crime goes down, and where kids are surrounded by people who will love them up.

The Boggs Educational Center

We are working to create a school that enriches a community. The Boggs Educational Center in Detroit will be that school. Our mission is to nurture creative, critical thinkers who contribute to the health of the surrounding community. This means that they also be healthy—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and academically. Clearly, our vision of a school that contributes to a healthy community is inspired by our connection with Grace. When we asked permission to use her name in the school, she granted her blessing in the form of a challenge. “As you imagine this school,” she told us, “you must think beyond what you ever thought possible.” “You too,” she reminded us, “are as shaped by traditional ideas of what education should be as everyone else in this country.” The difficult thing will be to create something that takes us to the next level of who we must become as human beings.

The social philosopher and educator John Dewey wrote, “The teaching-learning environments that would bring greatest growth are places where children and adults grow together, where the schools are not separate from the community.” In order to foster that kind of growth, we have to rethink our notion that schools are the places where adults are the holders and dispensers of all knowledge. In fact, many of the disagreements among adults in the education field are around what kids should know. Rarely, if ever, are young people asked what they would like to know or what they feel they need to know. Their voices are dismissed with the assumption that they could not possibly know what they need. In the meantime, technology is changing at such a rapid pace that the gap from one generation to the next is shrinking. Young people already know more about some aspects of the world than most adults, and yet we continue to pretend that young people have nothing to offer us. It is time for us all to learn together to bring the greatest growth. We have to believe, for instance, that it is better if students and teachers with an interest in pottery could take a class together. We have to believe that it is possible for young people to teach adults in subjects such as modern hip-hop, using technology, or whatever interest a young person has a passion to share. We have to believe that everyone has something to share.

Our response to Grace's challenge is to create a space that honors the reality that we all have something to contribute, and that this contribution is sacred and must be brought forth. Once the energies and voices of young people are brought forth in a systemic way, on a consistent basis, we will be contributing to a brighter future in Detroit and in the country.

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This brighter future is upon us. The Boggs Educational Center is not the only example of the emerging paradigm shift in Detroit. On March 24, 2011, a coalition of organizations and schools gathered to discuss educational perspectives and practices for postindustrial Detroit. The conversation included the Nsoroma Institute and Catherine Ferguson Academy, as well as the East Michigan Environmental Action Council, Matrix Theatre, and Detroit Summer-Live Arts Media Project. We gathered to support one another in our efforts to involve students in reimagining our schools. We celebrated our community-based alternatives to the traditional school models that continue to fail our young people.

Indeed, a new spirit is rising up. The discussion in March was a continuation of the conversations we have been having in Detroit for years. And they will not stop. There are many lessons to be passed on, and there will be new challenges to face as we go forward. A new era of education is turning toward people instead of things. May this new spirit catch like fire.