

Tomorrow's Children: Partnership Education in Action

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“We are now at what scientists call a bifurcation point, where there are two very different scenarios for our future. One scenario is *dominator systems breakdown*: the unsustainable future of high technology guided by the dominator model. This is a future of nuclear bombs, biological warfare, and ever more sophisticated terrorism This is a future where advanced technologies will be used not to free our human potentials but to more effectively control and dominate. Ultimately, it is a future of environmental, nuclear, or biological holocaust.

The other scenario is *breakthrough to partnership*: the sustainable future of a world primarily orienting to the partnership model....To move toward this world, however, requires fundamental changes, including changes in our education that make it possible for today's and tomorrow's children to see that we *can* create a more equitable, peaceful and sustainable future.” -- Riane Eisler

Overview

The educational theorist Riane Eisler opens her highly-acclaimed book *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century* with a question. “What will the world be like,” she asks, “for tomorrow's children?” Her question has new resonance and immediacy in the wake of the terror of September 11, and demands to be answered with special care.

In this MEF video companion to her published work, Eisler argues that transforming education is central to understanding and breaking the cycle of global violence that devastated the 20th century and now threatens to undo the 21st. Her focus is on educating children, but her ultimate vision is a global culture of peace. Mixing realism with hope, this video therefore provides a practical blueprint for transforming the way we educate our children – and ourselves – in a world now dangerously transformed by confusion, hatred, violence and terror.

To these ends, the video provides an accessible and inspirational account of Eisler's Partnership Education model. Taking stock of the unprecedented challenges that children today face, she calls for a full-scale reassessment of how, what and why our schools teach, and lays out a dynamic and practical model for enacting meaningful change and educational reform.

While Eisler's Partnership Education model stands on its own as a complete educational program, it also serves as a tool for understanding, evaluating and reforming existing systems and practices. Her insights and ideas are therefore of interest to anyone who cares about education: from politicians who make educational policy, to school officials and administrators who shape and implement it, to teachers and parents who know most intimately what inspires children and can make a lasting difference in their lives.

Eisler's primary argument is that while there have been positive advances in the way we educate our children, the full potential of these advances tends to be short-circuited by the persistent presence of old ways of doing things. She argues that it is not enough to add alternative components to an existing educational program without first confronting the potentially restrictive assumptions and outmoded historic inheritances embedded in the program as a whole. Her prescription for change therefore addresses the fundamental nature of education and educational practice – in a way that retains what is best in traditional practice, while opening education to the future.

In the tradition of reformers such as Johann Pestalozzi, Maria Montessori and John Dewey, and against anachronistic dominator models based on ranking and traditional notions of power, Eisler's vision of Partnership Education is practical, democratic and uniquely suited to the times. It links educational process, content and classroom structure, and possesses the dynamic power needed to clear space for the kinds of creativity, flexibility, teamwork, innovation and life-long learning that the 21st-century – and the imaginations of our children – demand.

A Note On This Video Guide

This MEF guide is designed to help you focus on the key themes and ideas presented in *Tomorrow's Children*, and to inspire critical reflection and discussion about the specifics of Partnership Education.

The structure of the guide follows the structure of the video. For each of the video's four major sections, you will find a list of **Key Points**, followed by a series of **Discussion Questions**. The questions are designed to help spark and frame productive dialogue around these issues between teachers, students, parents, school officials and policy makers – all of those who have the power to change the way we educate tomorrow's children.

Key Points and Discussion Questions by Section

I. Introduction

Key Points:

- In the midst of rapid change, today and tomorrow's children face unprecedented challenges: personal and ethical challenges; environmental & economic challenges; social and technological challenges.

- The old model of education, elements of which still persist, was built for a different time – a time when an industrial ethos translated into a value system that saw education as something done *to* students rather than *with* them.
- Because children today live in an entirely different world, educators need to find new ways to engage their students in meaningful and relevant ways.
- Simply adding new elements to an educational model still wedded to the past cannot create real change. Even the best ideas are likely to fall off and be pushed out if the old values and structures persist.
- We need an integrative approach – one that adds innovative elements but goes much further to transform systems themselves.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the specific challenges children today face? In what ways are these challenges “unprecedented”?
2. As cultural, technological and global change continue to accelerate, what kinds of new challenges do you feel tomorrow’s children will face?
3. What does it mean, specifically, to do education *with* children? In what ways is such a collaborative approach to education appropriate given children’s experiences and needs outside of the classroom?
4. What limits (practical, emotional, etc.), if any, do you see to such a collaborative approach? And why do you see it this way?
5. When does the addition of a new component or approach to the overall educational program become structural in your view? In other words, what kinds of additions to the existing way of doing things might have the power to transform the overall, systemic approach to education?

II. Partnership & Dominator Models

Key Points:

The Dominator Model

- The traditional educational model is derived from a Dominator Model whose top-down, rigidly structured relations reflected and reproduced the industrial and patriarchal values of its time.
- The Dominator Model was/is based on rankings and the need to fit students to fixed stations in life.
- The primary effect of those elements of the Dominator Model that still persist is to reinforce authoritarian social and family structures, male dominance, high levels of violence and abuse.

The Partnership Model

- In contrast to the strict hierarchies of the Dominator Model, the Partnership Model is based on linking.
- It seeks to reflect and reproduce democratic social and family structures, gender equality, low levels of violence and abuse.
- While not based on ranking, it still respects and includes hierarchies – of actualization, not domination – which emphasize very clear lines of responsibility and leadership.
- The Partnership Model redefines leadership as empowering, not as domination through control and force.
- Partnership Education provides a new, integrative framework for education which the Dominator Model cannot, by definition, accommodate.
- Technological advancement and change, coupled with a Dominator Model of learning and understanding, can have disastrous consequences.
- While many schools have made positive moves toward the Partnership approach, most educational systems are still bound by holdovers – inheritances from a time when democracy and human rights were virtually unknown.
- Partnership Education provides the kind of complete reassessment and reconfiguration that is needed to truly reform education.

Discussion Questions

1. What's already being done in the school you work in, your children's school, or schools you're familiar with that meets the criteria and spirit of the Partnership Model?
2. What "holdover" elements of the Dominator Model do you see at work? Why do you think this is the case?
3. What, in your view, is the role of inspiration in education?
4. What do you see as the potential or real effects of each of these models on the educational experience of students? Teachers? Administrators? Parents? Politicians who make educational policy?
5. How do you feel the current political climate (local, state, federal) fits with these two models?
6. Talk about the phenomenon of school violence and bullying in light of these two models. Does school violence indicate a need, as some would argue, for a return to even more extreme versions of the Dominator Model? Or is it the case, as Eisler and the teachers in the video contend, that violence is far less likely to occur in a Partnership style school?
7. How do you see these two models in terms of the gender of students? How might the implementation of the Partnership Model affect the educational experience of boys and girls *as* boys and girls?

8. How might Partnership Education address and potentially lessen the threat of technological/environmental disaster?

III. The Three Elements of Partnership Education:

Key Points:

1. Process: How we learn and teach

- In Partnership Education, children are true partners in their education. Students take responsibility for their learning in ways that empower them and reduce their sense of alienation from learning, their teachers and each other.
- Children work toward cooperation and mutual support, within hierarchies of actualization rather than of fear and domination.
- Partnership between students and teachers is not done in isolation – not done in some classes on some days – but is instead fully integrated into every aspect of the educational experience.
- The teaching style therefore becomes democratic – not in the sense that students decide all things, but in a way that aligns student interest with teacher knowledge.
- Teachers teach, but they are also mentors and facilitators.

Discussion Questions:

1. With regard to Eisler's discussion of process, how do children currently partner with other students and teachers in the classroom? How does this work?
2. How and to what extent would you say the classroom(s) you're focusing on is democratic? How and when is it not, and why?
3. What exactly do you think is meant by "democratic education"?
4. With regard to a specific educational institution, in what ways is partnering "fully integrated"? In what ways are there limits on partnership across the entire educational experience?
5. What's the nature of these limits and barriers? Who or what sets them? What interests are served by setting such limits? What interests are not served?

2. Content: What we teach

- Stories and narratives are the essence of curriculum content, and these narratives are always based on assumptions about what's valued and what's not.
- Partnership Education includes a wider variety of stories than traditional, standards-based curricula, woven together with attention to standard subjects.
- Partnership Education combines new curricula with existing ones, assuring that what's best is maintained while making room for what's new and necessary to meet the complete needs of students.

- The Partnership Education curriculum model is integrative. It can be understood as a tapestry, composed of interlacing threads and cross-stitches -- traditional subjects, alternative subjects, cosmic and social sensibility all coming together to form an integrated and irreducible whole.
- The Learning Tapestry combines work in traditional subjects such as math, science and literature with alternative subjects such as media literacy connected to students' lived experience – all within the context of ongoing stories about cosmic, planetary and cultural evolution on the one hand, and the evolution of social consciousness (multiculturalism, gender balance and environmental awareness) on the other.
- The tapestry metaphor points to two basic assumptions underlying the Partnership Education curriculum: 1) that the inclusion of new and evolving narratives can enhance perspectives on traditional content; and 2) that academic subjects can never be critically and fully engaged or understood in isolation from each other, students' lives, and the world.

Discussion Questions:

5. With regard to Eisler's discussion of content, what are the sources of the stories today's students seem to learn from most? Is it from narratives spun in the course of school work, or narratives they're exposed to beyond the classroom?
6. Why are the "vertical threads" Eisler describes important? How might they be effectively woven into the traditional subject areas?
7. Who or what are the key storytellers of our time? What role do media play as storytellers, and how has this altered the way stories are received in the classroom and via books? How might Partnership Education adapt to or affect this reality?
8. In your view, which model – Partnership or Dominator – seems best equipped to compete with media as an educational force?
9. Can you characterize the kinds of stories students are exposed to in the classroom – through class content, discussion, textbooks? Is there a pattern to what these stories focus on, what they value, what they exclude, how they are told?
10. What forces shape the nature and kind of stories that are told in the classroom? Textbooks? Time pressure? Institutional pressure? Politics?
11. What kinds of education-based narratives seem to interest and inspire students most? Which least? How do you account for the differences?
12. How does the current curriculum perpetuate the kind of dominant narratives of hierarchy, violence and exclusion Eisler speaks about?
13. How might her model work to transform the stories currently told in different kinds of classes?

3. Structure: The learning environment:

- Partnership Education does not call for a completely horizontal and laissez faire organization.

- The structure allows for hierarchies, but redefines them as hierarchies of actualization and realization, rather than of domination.
- The structure relies on a model of faculty and administrative leadership as empowering rather than disempowering to students.
- Students learn in an environment that provides an experiential education in democracy.
- The environment is dynamic, with students partnering constantly with each other and with teachers – inspiring self-direction, team work, constant interaction, problem-solving, responsibility for their education and life-long learning.
- Schools that use the Partnership structure are characteristically violence-free.

Discussion Questions:

14. How would you describe the current classroom environment or overall educational structure at your school or another you know of? Are there differences between certain classroom environments and the overall environment of the school? If so, what do you see as the potential or actual effects of this discrepancy?
15. What constitutes, in your mind, a horizontal or laissez faire educational structure, as compared to the structure Eisler has in mind – one based on “hierarchies of actualization”?
16. Where do you see the Partnership idea of structure working now? To what effect? To what extent is it integrated in the way she feels is necessary? What are the effects you see, in practice, when full integration fails?
17. Talk about the two different styles of leadership Eisler mentions. What specific and explicit distinctions do you make between these ways of leading?
18. What, exactly, would an “experiential education in democracy” mean? What would it look like?
19. How might the Partnership structure help create or promote violence-free environments?

IV. Future of Education

Key Points:

- The current direction of educational reform threatens to erase educational advances and take us back to the anachronistic Dominator Model of ranking, inequity, rote learning and testing.
- The emphasis on testing puts children in the ranks of top and bottom, and is used to publicly humiliate struggling schools.
- These reforms, in pushing out many of the gains we’ve made in reforming education in a more democratic direction, also stand to limit the time that teachers have to spend with students personally, and to crowd out alternative content.

- Modern civilization is at a crucial turning point. The Dominator Model, in combination with technological development, threatens to lead us to self-destruction.
- It's imperative that we give students an education that can help them navigate these difficult times while at the same time helping them envision new forms of possibility and a different future.

Discussion Questions:

1. What kinds of reforms have been implemented at your school over the past five years?
2. What kinds of new pressures have resulted from these reforms? In other words, what's changed, how has it changed, and what stands to change?
3. Do you feel that Partnership Education could be implemented effectively in a school that faces new state and federal pressures to test students? Can you think of ways this might be possible, even in the most pressing circumstances? What would have to happen to make it happen?
4. How do Eisler's ideas challenge the current direction of educational reform? Do you feel that for her model to work in a truly integrated fashion, change must first happen at the top? Try to be as specific as possible in supporting your position.
5. Can you envision ways that the Partnership Model could work within the context of standards-based education and state testing? Can you think of ways it might perhaps be even *more* effective than what's currently in place to meet these new requirements? In other words, is there a possibility that this model could actually help prepare students for such standardized tests, while also delivering a learning experience that goes beyond what tests can measure?