

Partnership Education in the 21st Century

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At the core of every child is an intact human. Children have an enormous capacity for love, joy, creativity, and caring. Children have a voracious curiosity, a hunger for understanding and meaning. Children also have an acute inborn sense of fairness. Above all, children yearn for love and validation and, given half a chance, are able to give them bountifully in return. In today's world of rapid technological, economic, and social flux, the development of these capacities is more crucial than ever before.

One of the greatest and most urgent challenges facing today's children is how they will nurture and educate tomorrow's children. Therein lies the hope for the world.

I believe that if we give enough of today's children the nurturance and education that help them live in the equitable, nonviolent, gender-fair, caring, and creative ways that characterize partnership relations, they will be able to make enough changes in beliefs and institutions to support this way of relating in all spheres of life. They will also be able to give *their* children the nurturance and education that make the difference between realizing, or stunting, our great human potentials.

For over two centuries, educational reformers such as Johann Pestalozzi (1776/1781), Maria Montessori (1870/1912), John Dewey (1859/1916), and Paulo Freire (1921/1997) have called for an education that prepares young people for democracy rather than authoritarianism and fosters ethical and caring relations.¹ Building on the work of these and other germinal educational thinkers and on my research and teaching experiences over three decades, I have proposed an expanded approach to educational reform.

An educational system that is appropriate for a modern democracy is one based on a partnership, not a dominator, model.

I call this approach *partnership education*. It is designed not only to help young people better navigate through our difficult times but also to help them create a future oriented more towards what in my study of 30,000 years of cultural evolution I have identified as a *partnership* rather than *dominator* model.

Although we may not use these terms, we are all familiar with these two models from our own lives. We know the pain, fear, and tension of relationships based on domination and submission, on coercion and accommodation, on jockeying for control, on trying to manipulate and cajole when we are unable to express our real feelings and needs, on the miserable, awkward tug of war for that illusory moment of power rather than powerlessness, on our unfulfilled yearning for caring and mutuality, on all the misery, suffering, and lost lives and potentials that come from these kinds of relations. Most of us also have, at least intermittently, experienced another way of being, one where we feel safe and are seen for who we truly are, where our essential humanity and that of others shines through, perhaps only for a little while, lifting our hearts and spirits, enfolding us in a sense that the world can after all be right, that we are valued and valuable.

But the partnership and dominator models not only describe individual relationships. They describe systems of belief and social structures that either nurture and support, or inhibit and undermine, equitable, democratic, nonviolent, and caring relations. Once we understand the partnership and dominator cultural, social, and personal configurations, we can more effectively develop the educational methods, materials, and institutions that foster a less violent, more equitable, democratic, and sustainable future. We can also more effectively sort out what in

existing educational approaches we want to retain and strengthen or what we want to leave behind.

Although we do not usually think of education in this way, what has been passed from generation to generation as knowledge and truth derives from earlier times. This is important, since otherwise we would, as the expression goes, constantly have to reinvent the wheel, and much that is valuable would be lost. But it also poses problems.

To begin with, during much of recorded history prior to the last several hundred years, most institutions, including schools, were designed to support authoritarian, inequitable, rigidly male-dominant, and chronically violent social structures. That is, they were designed to support the core configuration of the dominator model. This kind of education was appropriate, even necessary, for autocratic kingdoms, empires, and feudal fiefdoms that were constantly at war. But it is not appropriate, and certainly is not necessary, for a democratic and more peaceful society. Nonetheless, much in the present curricula still reflects this legacy.

Many of our teaching methods also stem from much more authoritarian, inequitable, male-dominated, violent times. Like childrearing methods based on mottos like “spare the rod and spoil the child,” these teaching methods were designed to prepare people to accept their place in rigid hierarchies of domination and unquestioningly obey orders from above, whether from their teachers in school, supervisors at work, or rulers in government. These educational methods often model uncaring, even violent behaviors, teaching children that violence and abuse by those who hold power is normal and right. They rely heavily on negative motivations, such as fear, guilt, and shame. They force children to focus primarily on unempathic competition (as is still done by grading on the curve or by norm referenced standardized tests) rather than empathic cooperation (as in team projects). And in significant ways, they suppress inquisitiveness.

Again, all of this was appropriate for the autocratic monarchies, empires, and feudal fiefdoms that preceded more democratic societies. It was appropriate for industrial assembly lines structured to conform to the dominator model, where workers were forced to be mere cogs in the industrial machine and to strictly follow orders without question. But it is decidedly *not* appropriate for a democratic society.

Partnership Education

Partnership education integrates three core interconnected components. These are partnership *process*, partnership *structure*, and partnership *content*.

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?

What kind of view of ourselves, our world, and our roles and responsibilities in it are young people taking away from their schooling?

Partnership structure is about *where* learning and teaching take place: what kind of *learning environment* we would construct if we follow the partnership model. Is the structure of a school, classroom, and/or homeschool 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 by a combination of horizontal linkings and hierarchies of actualization where power is not used to disempower others but rather to empower them?

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 dominator models 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?

Human Possibilities

Young people are being given a false picture of what it means to be human. We tell them to be good and kind, nonviolent and giving. But on all sides they see and hear stories that portray us as bad, cruel, violent, and selfish. In the mass media, the focus of both action entertainment and news is on hurting and killing. Situation comedies make insensitivity, rudeness, and cruelty seem funny. Cartoons present violence as exciting, funny, and without real consequences.

This holds up a distorted mirror of themselves to our youth. And rather than correcting this false image of what it means to be human, some aspects of our education reinforce it. History curricula still emphasize battles and wars. Western classics such as Homer’s *Iliad* and many of Shakespeare’s works romanticize “heroic violence.” 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 dominator or control system of relations. They are, however, inappropriate if young people are to learn to live in a democratic, peaceful, equitable, and Earth-honoring way: the partnership way urgently needed if today’s and tomorrow’s children are to have a better future—perhaps even *any* future at all.

Youth futures are impoverished when their vision of the future comes out of a dominator worldview. This worldview is our heritage from earlier societies structured around rankings of “superiors” over “inferiors.” In these societies, violence and abuse were required to maintain rigid rankings of domination—whether man over woman, man over man, nation over nation, race over race, or religion over religion.

Over the last several centuries we have seen many organized challenges to traditions of domination. These challenges are part of the movement toward a more equitable and caring partnership social structure worldwide. But at the same time, much in our education still reinforces what I call dominator socialization: a way of viewing the world and living in it that constricts young people’s perceptions of what is possible or even moral, which keeps many of them locked into a perennial rebellion against what is without a real sense of what can be.

Partnership Education and the Transformation of Society

We need an education that counters dominator socialization—and with this, the unconscious valuing of the kinds of undemocratic, abusive, and even violent relations that were considered normal and even moral in earlier, more authoritarian times.

Partnership education includes education for partnership rather than dominator childrearing. Children who are dependent on abusive adults tend to replicate these behaviors with their children, having been taught to associate love with coercion and abuse. And often they learn to use psychological defense mechanisms of denial and to deflect repressed pain and anger onto those perceived as weak, in other words, in scapegoating, bullying, and on a larger scale in pogroms and ethnic cleansings.

In schools, teachers can help students experience partnership relations as a viable alternative though partnership process. And partnership structure provides the learning environment that young people need to develop their unique capacities.² But partnership process and structure are not enough without partnership content: narratives that help young people better understand human possibilities.

As young people will attest, Partnership Education is much more interesting and exciting than the old curriculum.

For example, narratives still taught in many schools and universities tell us that Darwin's scientific theories show that "natural selection," "random variation," and later ideas such as "kinship selection" and "parental investment" are the only principles in evolution. As David Loye shows in *Darwin's Lost Theory of Love*, actually Darwin did *not* share this view, emphasizing that, particularly as we move to human evolution, other dynamics, including the evolution of what he called the "moral sense" come into play. Or, as Frans deWaal writes in *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*, the desire for a *modus vivendi* fair to everyone may be regarded as an evolutionary outgrowth of the need to get along and cooperate.

Partnership education offers scientific narratives that focus not only on competition but also, following the new evolutionary scholarship, on cooperation. For example, young people learn how, by the grace of evolution, biochemicals called neuropeptides reward our species with sensations of pleasure, not only when we are cared for, but also when we care for others.

Awareness of the interconnected web of life that is our environment, which has largely been ignored in the traditional curriculum, leads to valuing of activities and policies that promote environmental sustainability: the new partnership ethic for human and ecological relations needed in our time.

Because the social construction of the roles and relations of the female and male halves of humanity is central to either a partnership or dominator social configuration, unlike the traditional male-centered curricula, partnership education is gender-balanced. It integrates the history, needs, problems, and aspirations of both halves of humanity into what is taught as important knowledge and truth. Because difference is not automatically equated with inferiority or superiority in the partnership model, partnership education is multicultural. It offers a pluralistic perspective that includes peoples of all races and a variety of backgrounds, as well as the real-life drama of the animals and plants of the Earth we share. Since partnership education offers a systemic approach, environmental education is not an add-on but an integral part of the curriculum.

Partnership education offers empirical evidence that our human strivings for love, beauty, and justice are just as rooted in evolution as our capacity for violence and aggression. It does not leave young people with the sense that life is devoid of meaning or that humans are inherently violent and selfish; if this were indeed the case, why would anyone bother trying to change anything!

Moreover, as the young people we have worked with through the Center for Partnership Studies' Partnership Education Program will attest, partnership education is much more interesting and exciting than the old curriculum. It offers many new perspectives: from partnership games, multicultural math, and a wealth of information about women worldwide to a new perspective on our prehistory and history; from the opportunity to talk about issues that really engage young people to ideas, resources, and social actions that can accelerate the shift from domination to partnership worldwide.

A New View of Our Past—and Potential Future

Much of the hopelessness of young people today stems from the belief that the progressive modern movements have failed and that the only possibility is to either dominate or be dominated. There are many factors contributing to this distorted and limiting view of possible futures. But a major reason is that our education does not show young people that, despite enormous resistance and periodic regressions, the movements toward a more just and peaceful world have in fact made great gains—and that these gains have been due to the persistence of small, unpopular, and often persecuted minorities.

Partnership education offers young people a clearer understanding of history—one that is essential if they are to more effectively participate in creating the more equitable, peaceful, and sustainable future that cannot be constructed within the context of social arrangements based on domination and control. It shows that the struggle for our future is not between capitalism and communism, between right and left, or religion and secularism, but between a mounting movement toward partnership relations in all spheres of life and the resistance (with periodic regressions) of strong dominator systems.

By using the analytical lens of the partnership/dominator continuum, young people can see that along with the massive technological upheavals of the last 300 years has come a growing questioning of entrenched traditions of domination. The 18th century rights of man movement challenged the supposedly divinely ordained right of kings to rule over their "subjects," ushering in a shift from authoritarian monarchies to more democratic republics. The 18th and 19th feminist movement challenged men's supposedly divinely ordained right to rule over women and children in the "castles" of their homes. The movement against slavery, culminating during both the 19th and 20th centuries in worldwide movements to shift from the colonization and exploitation of indigenous peoples to independence from foreign rule, as well as global movements challenging economic exploitation and injustice, the rise of organized labor, and a gradual shift from unregulated robber-baron capitalism to government regulations, (for example, anti-monopoly laws and economic safety nets such as Social Security and unemployment insurance) also challenged entrenched patterns of domination. The 20th century civil rights and the women's liberation and women's rights movements were part of this continuing challenge, as were the 19th century pacifist movement and the 20th century peace movement, expressing the first fully organized challenge to the violence of war as a means of resolving international conflicts. The 20th century family planning movement has been as a key to women's emancipation as well as to the alleviation of poverty and greater opportunities for children worldwide. And the 20th century environmental movement has frontally challenged the once hallowed "conquest of nature" that many young people today rightly recognize as a threat to their survival.

But history is not a linear forward movement. Precisely because of the strong thrust toward partnership, there has been massive dominator systems resistance. We also have over the last 300 years seen resurgences of authoritarianism, racism, and religious persecutions. In the United States we have seen the repeal of laws providing economic safety nets, renewed opposition to reproductive rights for women, and periodic violence against those seeking greater rights. In Africa and Asia, even after Western colonial regimes were overthrown, we have seen the rise of authoritarian dictatorships by local elites over their own people, resulting in renewed repression

and exploitation. We have seen a recentralization of economic power worldwide under the guise of economic globalization.³ Under pressure from major economic players, governments have cut social services and shredding economic safety nets—an “economic restructuring” that is particularly hurtful to women and children worldwide. The backlash against women’s rights has been increasingly violent, as in the government supported violence against women in fundamentalist regimes such as those in Afghanistan and Iran. We have also seen ever more advanced technologies used to exploit, dominate, and kill—as well as to further “man’s conquest of nature,” wreaking ever more environmental damage.

These regressions raise the question of what lies behind them—and what we can do to prevent them. Once again, there are many factors, as there always are in complex systems. But a major factor that becomes apparent using the analytical lens of the partnership and dominator social configurations is the need to fully integrate challenges to domination and violence in the so-called public spheres of politics and economics and in the so-called private spheres of parent-child and man-woman relations.

In Europe, for example, a rallying cry of the Nazis was the return of women to their “traditional” place. In Stalin’s Soviet Union, earlier feeble efforts to equalize relations between women and men in the family were abandoned. When Khomeini came to power, one of his first acts was to repeal family laws granting women a modicum of rights. And the brutally authoritarian and violent Taliban made the total domination of women a centerpiece of their violence-based social policy.

This emphasis on gender relations based on domination and submission was not coincidental. Dominator systems will continue to rebuild themselves unless we change the base on which they rest: domination and violence in the foundational human relations between parents and children and men and women.

The reason, simply put, is that how we structure relations between parents and children and women and men is crucial to how we perceive what is normal in human relations. It is in these intimate relations that we first learn and continually practice either partnership or domination, either respect for human rights or acceptance of human rights violations as “just the way things are.”

Young people need to understand these still generally ignored social dynamics. They need to understand the significance of today’s increased violence against women and children and of a mass media that bombards us with stories and images presenting the infliction of pain as exciting and sexy. If they are to build a world where economic and political systems are more just and caring, they need an awareness that these images normalize, and even romanticize, intimate relations of domination and submission as the foundation for a system based on rankings of “superiors” over “inferiors.” At the same time, they need to understand the significance of the fact that child abuse, rape, and wife beating are increasingly prosecuted in some world regions, that a global women’s rights movement is frontally challenging the domination of half of humanity by the other half, and that the United Nations has finally adopted conventions to protect children’s and women’s human rights. With an understanding of the connections between partnership or domination in the so-called private and public spheres, young people will be better equipped to create the future they want and deserve.

I have seen how inspired young people become once they understand that partnership relations—be they intimate or international—are all of one cloth. I have seen how excited they become when they are shown evidence of ancient societies orienting to the partnership model in all world regions.⁴ And I have seen how they move from apathy to action once they fully understand that there is a viable alternative to the inequitable, undemocratic, violent, and uncaring relations that have for so long distorted the human spirit and are today decimating our natural habitat.

Through partnership education—through partnership process, structure, and content—we can help young people understand and experience the possibility of partnership relations, structures, and worldviews. We can all use partnership education in our homes, schools, and communities to highlight the enormous human potential to learn, to grow, to create, and to relate to one another in mutually supporting and caring ways. I believe young people really care about their future, and that if their education offers them the vision and the tools to help them more effectively participate in its creation, they will readily do so.

The Partnership School of the Future

When I think of the school of the future, I see a place of adventure, magic, and excitement, a place that, generation after generation, adults will remember from their youth with pleasure, and continue to participate in to ensure that all children learn to live rich, caring, and fulfilling lives. An atmosphere of celebration will make coming to this school a privilege rather than a chore. It will be a safe place—physically and emotionally—a place to express and share feelings and ideas, to create and enjoy; a place where the human spirit will be nurtured and grow; where spiritual courage will be modeled and rewarded.

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In this partnership school, children will learn about the wonder and mystery of evolution. When they look at the sky, they will know the amazing truth that our stars, which seem so tiny from afar, are not only immense but afire with enormous energy, and that the energy of one of these stars, our sun, made possible the miracle of life here on Earth. They will be awed by how the inanimate became animate and enchanted by the many ways life has continued to reinvent itself. When they look at a stone, leaf, or raindrop, they will be aware that the tiniest subatomic particles share properties with the largest constellations of stars, that energy and matter are not really separate, and that all life forms on our planet share elements of the same genetic code and come from a common ancestor. They will understand that this interconnected web of life that we call Nature is both immensely resilient and terribly fragile, that we need to treat our natural habitat with caring and respect, not only because we depend on nature to survive, but also because nature is a thing of wonder and beauty—because, as our Native American and prehistoric European partnership traditions tell us, it is imbued with the Sacred.

In this partnership school, young people will hear many stories of the wonders of life on our Earth. They will learn that cooperation and caring play a major part in the life of many species with whom we share our planet, and that what marks our human emergence is not our capacity to inflict pain but our enormous capacity to give and feel pleasure. They will know about chemicals that, by the grace of evolution, course through our bodies, rewarding us with sensations of sometimes exquisite pleasure when we create and care. And they will understand that this pleasure is ours not only when we are loved but when we love another, not only when we are touched with caring but when we touch another with caring.

Tomorrow's children will know that all of us, no matter what our color or culture, come from a common mother, way back in Africa millions of years ago. They will appreciate diversity—beginning with the differences between the female and male halves of humanity. They will have mental maps that do not lead to the scapegoating and persecution of those who are not quite like them.

Both girls and boys will be aware of the enormous range of their human potentials. They will be equipped to cultivate the positives within themselves and others. They will understand what makes for real political and economic democracy, and be prepared to help create and maintain it. They will have learned to value women's contributions throughout human history, and to give particular value to the caring and caretaking work that was once devalued as "mere women's

work.” They will also understand that this work is the highest calling for both women and men, that nonviolence and caretaking do not make boys “sissies,” and that when girls are assertive leaders they are not being “unfeminine” but expressing part of their human potential.

In this school of the future, children will learn to be just as proficient in using the tools of the partnership and dominator models as in using computer technology. Partnership literacy and competency will be cross-stitched into all aspects of the curriculum. Children will learn to regulate their own impulses, not out of fear of punishment and pain, but in anticipation of the pleasure of responsible and truly satisfying lives and relationships.

Stories will be told of heroic women and men who worked for a safer, more equitable world. There will be tales of inspirational leadership. There will be laboratories for developing partnership social and economic inventions: laboratories not only for learning about the natural sciences, but also about the social sciences and how we may use them to create a partnership world.

Partnership education will be part of everyone’s consciousness, as the whole community will recognize that children are our most precious resource—to be nurtured, cultivated, and encouraged to flower in the unique ways each of us can. Partnership schools will be resources of and for the whole community, linked to other schools, communities, and nations through electronic communications fostering a world community.

In partnership schools, tomorrow’s children will form visions of what can be and acquire the understandings and skills to make these visions come true. They will learn how to create partnership families and communities worldwide. And they will join together to construct a world where chronic violence, inequality, and insensitivity are no longer “just the way things are” but “the way things were.”

Many of us are already fashioning some of the educational building blocks for constructing the partnership schools of the future. There are indeed many resources for us to use and develop. There is also, as we saw, a great deal that stands in our way. But working together, we can build a new educational system based on the principles of the partnership school. As we do, we will lay the foundations not only for the new education that young people need for the 21st century but also for a more sustainable, equitable, and caring world.

Notes

1. These works foreshadow much that is still today considered progressive education. Pestalozzi, for example, already in the 18th century rejected the severe corporeal punishments and rote memorization methods prevalent in his time and instead used approaches geared to children’s stages of development.
2. For a description of partnership process, structure, and content as the three interconnected elements of partnership education, see Riane Eisler (2000).
3. Some readings that contain materials that could be excerpted by teachers are Jerry Mander and Edwin Goldsmith (1996); Hazel Henderson (1991); David Korten (1995); The Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan (1993); Riane Eisler, David Loye, and Kari Norgaard (1995); United Nations Development Program (1995); United Nations (1995). For a short piece that has some good statistics and could serve as a handout, see also David Korten (June 1997). See also the [Center for Partnership Studies’](#) website to download “[Changing the Rules of the Game: Work, Values, and Our Future](#)” by Riane Eisler, 1997; as well as David Korten’s website for additional materials.
4. See Riane Eisler (1988; 1996). For a detailed multicultural perspective, see Riane Eisler (2000).

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