

The View from New Orleans

by April Whatley Bedford

I don't recall ever being asked, throughout my teacher training or my years spent as an elementary educator, to define the purpose of education. Certainly I was never asked to do so as a student. Yet these days, the purpose of education is often on my mind, and I have settled—for the time being—on a list of purposes for education.

Beyond reaching specific academic goals or developing informed citizens, beyond providing a physically and psychologically safe learning environment, I believe that education in any setting should assist students in

- developing a sense of hope and possibility
- discovering their passions
- developing compassion
- becoming lifelong learners
- understanding that each individual has a contribution to make
- being moved to take action toward a better world

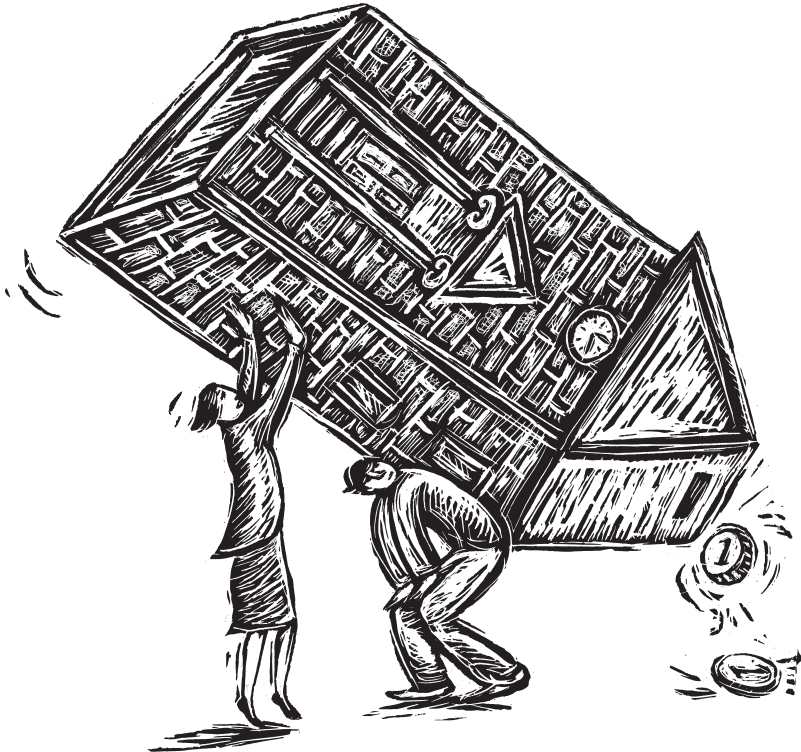
Do those purposes sound idealistic? Of course they do, but why would I be an educator if I were not an idealist? Do I believe they can be fulfilled? I could not continue to teach if I couldn't maintain my own sense of hope and possibility.

How do ideals mesh with the realities of education, particularly public education, today? Before August 29, 2005, I felt uniquely qualified to answer that question in the context of the public school system with which I worked most closely, that of New Orleans, Louisiana. Like most urban public-education systems, the schools of New Orleans were deeply troubled. Most were “low-performing,” according to high-stakes accountability measures. Many students were poor, and the battered, broken school buildings reflected that poverty. In most classrooms I visited, all the children were black. By contrast, the program in which I teach at the University of New Orleans (like most teacher-preparation programs across

the country) is composed primarily of white, middle-class females—in our case, disproportionately graduates of Catholic, all-girls college-preparatory academies. Although I remain staunchly committed to preparing such pre-service teachers for the public schools that so desperately need them, the clash between cultures when my students entered the public elementary schools of Orleans Parish was often disheartening.

On August 29, however, everything changed. Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and obliterated its public schools. Teachers disappeared; the children vanished. Most private schools have reopened; public schools in surrounding parishes are in session; and a few school buildings in Orleans Parish have reopened as charter schools—but for the time being, the public schools of New Orleans exist no longer.

The future of public education in New Orleans worries me. The segregation that existed before Katrina, due in part to migration to the suburbs and in part to the proliferation of private and parochial schools, divided students along lines of race, gender, class, and religion. I am afraid, on one hand, that the trend toward charter schools will further segment



our city into particular niches and erode the ideal of all children learning together under one roof with equal chances for success. On the other hand, stories in our local newspaper describe how eager displaced children are to return to the familiarity of their schools: families whose homes have disappeared are camping in tents and sleeping in their cars so their children can attend schools as soon as they reopen. My hope is that reopened schools will create communities that accept differences of all kinds; my fear is that the current situation in New Orleans is simply the first step toward eliminating public schools completely. For me, the lingering question is: "Will public schools in New Orleans be resurrected?"

As I wait for answers, I continue to prepare teachers. Like me, many of my students lost their homes. A number of them lost all their possessions; some lost family members. The children they will teach, when and if those children return to New Orleans, have also experienced great losses. Fostering a sense of hope and possibility is likely to be difficult. Although the tasks of rebuilding a home and a city can be mind numbing, the overwhelming compassion and support New Orleans residents have received from friends, acquaintances, and total strangers demonstrate, far better than I ever could, the purposes of education I try to communicate to my students.

We of southeastern Louisiana are trying to piece our lives back together. For thousands of teachers and students dispersed throughout the state and the nation, every day is a new beginning. There will always be students and teachers living in crisis; at such times, what seem to matter are not test scores or cultural differences, but caring and courage (Noddings 1984; Palmer 1998).

References

- Noddings, N. 1984. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.
- Palmer, P. J. 1998. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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