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Strike, Kenneth A. (2010). *Small Schools & Strong Communities: A Third Way of School Reform*. NY: Teachers College Press

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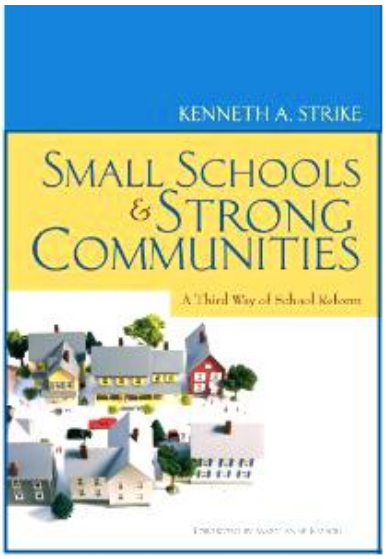

First and foremost, I would like to commend Kenneth Strike for this book. *Small Schools & Strong Communities* (2010), as noted in the introduction, has taken him about ten years to write and each page reflects such time and diligence. The book is insightful, clearly argued, and well-written; and for the most part, I find his argument convincing. Frequently I found myself enthralled by his insights and cheering for his conviction for democratic schools. Many times I found myself envious of Strike, wishing I would have thought of these ideas. On one hand, part of my enjoyment with this book is a personal bias. I, like Strike, have an affinity for the tools of normative philosophy and believe these tools are

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absolutely necessary in developing clear and coherent educational reforms. I have a particular interest in the relationship between human flourishing and education. In looking beyond my own biases, on the other hand, this book is an absolute must read for those deeply committed to creating democratic schools and deepening democracy within our society—even though Strike underestimates education's role in the latter.

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Since *Small Schools and Strong Communities* is such a rich and thoughtful book (a.k.a. read this book!) my review will take a quite unorthodox and ambitious path—especially for such a short review. Rather than review the books as is, I shall review it from the perspective of justice: hence focusing on a different question. Rather than asking the question: what are the merits of the book *Small Schools and Strong Communities?* I shall ask the question: How well does this book advance a concept of educational reform that aligns with the values of justice? Here I shall presuppose that justice is most likely achieved in a deep socialist democracy because such a society deepens democracy into the economic realm and expands the conditions for human flourishing (Cohen, 2008, 2009; Cunningham, 1987, 1994; Fung, 2003; Levine, 1988, 1998; Wright, 2010; Young, 2002). The reader will notice that I am introducing a foreign and radical idea into our discussion—socialism. However as my review progresses, the idea of socialism, though radical, will not be too foreign; especially considering Strike's overall argument and his previous work (Strike, 1989, 2008).

However, the following precaution needs noting: I am not claiming that Strike should identify himself as a socialist; I remain neutral on this position. Rather my argument is that justice demands *something like* a deep socialist democracy, and thus effective educational reform must consider the ways in which we can provide children with the necessary educational skills and abilities to produce such a society.[1]

[1] This argument follows Amy Guttmann's (1999) idea of "conscious reproduction." However, unlike Guttmann, my claim is that education must prepare children to *produce* the desired society.

The basic premise of *Small Schools & Strong Communities* is that building strong communities is "the missing element in education reform" (p. xiii), and that small schools are better positioned to build such communities. Small schools, according to Strike, are better suited to advance human flourishing because of their ability to create and maintain community. Strike rightfully claims that small schools, in and of themselves, do not naturally create strong communities. Rather their size provides a better educational infrastructure for building strong communities; particularly because "…the pattern[s] of interactions between students and adults…" are more conducive for ensuring that children feel connected to the schooling process. However, before going any further it would be helpful to philosophically situate Strike's arguments. Strike's conception of educational reform and community is grounded within a neo-Aristotelian conception of human flourishing (MacIntyre, 1984). As such, human flourishing is grounded in the idea that one flourishes when engaged in social practices and institutional arrangements that are good their growth and development (Kraut, 2009). Consequently, Strike conceives of good educational practices—what he calls "shared educational projects" (p. 46-50)—as those practices that properly situate a student within an intellectual and democratic community; however these communities themselves need to support what is good for human flourishing (Nussbaum, 1992, 2000).

Even though small schools are better positioned to build communities, building strong communities takes some elbow grease. Educators and policy-makers must make a conscious and deliberate effort to build strong communities. Strike outlines three aphorisms that should guide such reform (p. xv):

- Authentic learning is an act of affiliation
- We are all in this together
- Alienation is the problem; community is the cure.

In addition, educational reformers need to be aware of two social pathologies which corrode 'good communities': *alienation* and *anomie*. I shall come back to these pathologies later.

The first aphorism (*authentic learning is an act of affiliation)* focuses on the intellectual community and the schools' ability to educate children into said communities.

According to Strike, being educated into an intellectual community occurs though a process of normation, which is "the internalization of the norms and the goods that are internal to and constitutive of practices" (p. 19). Small schools open the possibility for students to internalize these norms because they place more emphasis on *authentic teaching* and *authentic learning*, wherein *authentic teaching* is teaching that faithfully represents the nature of the subject being taught, and *authentic learning* is an act of affiliation within a community. As Strike explains, for instance, "a genuine engagement with mathematics is a matter of internalizing an appreciation for those goods that are integral to mathematics, and genuine competence in mathematics is a matter of developing a commitment to and grasp of those norms important to the practice of mathematics" (p. 43). In addition, genuine engagement into the practice of mathematics necessitates understanding the practices that make a good mathematician, as well as internalizing the norms and perceptions of a good mathematician. To illustrate why small schools increase the authentic learning process, Strike draws upon research and personal accounts on the small schools movement (p. xx-xxi). Strike explains that such schools are embodying these intellectual values because they place more weight upon affiliating children into the habits of mind of a particular intellectual community (Meier, 1995).

The second aphorism (*we are all in this together)* concerns the importance of building democratic communities within schools. In Strike's terms, democratic communities tend to represent the notion "We are all in this together" (WITT), and he compares this acronym to "You're on your own" (YOYO). According to Strike, high schools and to a large degree middle schools perpetuate a pernicious from of possessive individualism (YOYO), wherein more emphasis is placed on education as a positional good for market success and less emphasis is given to education for education's sake (pp. 11-14). Small schools, on the other hand, are more likely to emphasize WITT because the core principle within this movement is *community* (p. 73). Since small schools place more emphasis on personal and meaningful human contact, they are more likely to embrace two essential democratic values: *equal education* and *communicative justice*. *Equal education*, according to Strike, is based on the notion that neither access to

education nor the outcomes of education should depend on characteristics such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference. Small schools are more likely to provide children with an equal education because they provide a real and effective educational environment supportive of authentic learning and teaching. While, *communicative justice* is the notion that schools must "…act to communicate the message that all are valued equally," which is best communicated through the deliberative democratic process (p. 77). Strike finds that since small schools tend to institutionalize democratic processes within the educational structure, they have the propensity to communicate this message more effectively than larger schools.

Strike's third aphorism (*alienation is the problem; community is the cure*) deals with the ways in which strong school communities can overcome the problems of alienation. This aphorism is somewhat confusing because the notion of "alienation" in this aphorism is actually acting as a place holder for two different social pathologies: *alienation* and *anomie*. According to Strike, alienation occurs when "one must comply with the expectations of an institution whose purposes one does not share" (p. 21). Whereas, anomie occurs when individuals "…lack moral and valuation standards that are sufficient to guide action" (p. 21). Stated differently, alienation occurs within education when individuals feel disconnected from the intellectual or the democratic community of the school; anomie occurs when individuals lose meaning within the educational process. Small schools can help overcome these problems insofar as they focus on building educational communities that are authentic and provide children with a sense of meaning within said process. Here we see that the third aphorism is the result of breakdowns in the first two aphorisms. Hence, overcoming alienation and anomie, at least within the education system, depends on educators and policy makers building polices around the first two aphorisms, something small schools aim to maintain.

Small Schools and Strong Communities in regards to Justice

In regard to deepening democracy *within* the education system, this book provides a wonderful philosophical

explanation of why the small school movements, and their emphasis on community, can provide a framework for guiding educational polices. Strike rightly emphasizes small schools alone will not create democratic or intellectual communities; rather, building such communities must be a conscious and deliberate act on the part of policymakers and educators. Strike's argument is also apt when he illustrates that small schools are not the silver bullet for our education problems, however they are a key mechanism for advancing the demands of justice. In this sense, this book proposes a giant leap forward in school reform, at least compared to what is commonly offered.

However, in terms of proposing an education reform that prepares children to create the just society, *Small Schools and Strong Communities* doesn't go far enough, primarily because Strike neglects to address adequately the education children need to *create* a more just society. But to clarify this point let's focus on three connected issues: *the content of the curriculum*, *the nature of social pathologies*, and *communicative justice*.

As for the *content of the curriculum*, Strike is correct to note that schools should emphasize the importance of democratic communities and children should be normated into intellectual communities that are supportive of human flourishing. But the emphasis here needs to be placed on the issues of developing communities that are supportive of flourishing. For instance Strike states "…it is now time for a bit of revolutionary thinking about how to proceed with school reform" (p. xx). While I agree with this statement, such revolutionary thinking can only proceed by clearly describing the society that needs to be created in order to equalize one's opportunity to flourish. This requires educating children about the social practices which are counterproductive to justice.

Neglecting to consider the education children need to create a just society is especially obvious when looking at Strike's discussion of the *nature of social pathologies*. For example, Strike conceives alienation as occurring within two particular processes: the intellectual process and the schooling process. What he neglects is the societal process: the ways in which larger social processes (e.g., racism, sexism, capitalism, and the like) break down

healthy normation processes, which in turn affect the educational process. This is important to think through because alienation and anomie that occur at the societal level increase the likelihood of alienation and anomie within schools. In addition, when schools fail to prepare children to challenge these social ills, they then exacerbate the likelihood that these processes will appear in schools. I shall come back to this point. In the meantime, it is important to recognize that when Marx (alienation) and Durkheim (anomie) addressed these social pathologies they did so with an understanding of the ways in which large social processes create these social ills, and how these ills filtered into other aspects of our lives. In particular, for both Marx and Durkheim these problems were systemic problems, partly exacerbated by capitalism, with the propensity to pervade all social spheres (Giddens, 1973; Habermas, 1987). Marx even went to the extreme of claiming that "all labor within capitalism is alienated labor." (Ollman, 1977) One doesn't need to agree with Marx's extreme statement to recognize that alienation within capitalism has quite a pronounced effect on the alienation individuals will feel within other social institutions (Bauman, 2007, 2009). For example, in his classic book entitled *Learning to Labor,* Paul Willis (1981) explained how the alienation children face due to their economic opportunities outside of school affect the alienation they feel within schools. Adding to this point Sayer (2005), following Bourdieu (1984) explains that:

> Class inequalities involve not merely differences in wealth, income and economic security, but difference in access to valued circumstances, practices and ways of life—"goods" in a broad sense—and in the recognition or valuation of those goods and their holders. (p. 95)

The point to be noted here is that larger inequalities affect not only who has access to particular "intellectual communities" but who feels recognized within said communities. Thus, feeling alienated at one level of society has the propensity to increase alienation at other levels—including within education.

Finally let's turn our attention to the issues of *communicative justice*. Strike rightful places emphasis on communicative justice; however, he misjudges the

demands placed on education in order to achieve communicative justice. As Honneth (2010) explains, communicative justice depends on an ability to make it possible for all subjects to equally participate in such communicative relationships. Honneth goes on to explain that "…overcoming social pathologies and seeing through false convictions are the first and critical steps toward acquiring the *prerequisites* of communication and thus an insight into the necessary conditions of freedom" (p. 47).[2]

Thus communicative justice is achieved only insofar as "shared educational projects" are first and foremost aimed toward overcoming the social pathologies of alienation and anomie both within and outside the educational process. This means the establishment of an educational community based on mutual recognition and supportive of human flourishing requires that "shared educational projects" provide individuals with the collective capabilities to overcome these social ills. And in this case, capabilities, not only concern the child's ability to function within the educational process, but the capabilities to be empowered to analyze critically and possibly change the larger social world (de-Shalit, 2006, pp. 53-73). However, in neglecting the societal level and its effect on intellectual and democratic communities, Strike fails to recognize that an education system supportive of human flourishing depends on a society supportive of this goal; and when society fails to provide such support, education has to act as a counterweight against these injustices.

To elaborate my criticism, permit me give a concrete example. It is fair to assume that Strike would find it worthwhile to authentically teach children how to appreciate good music and to engage in the practice of music. To put this in Strike's terms, authentic teaching is to normate children into the music community. So let's assume the musical community that one is normated into is hip-hop. To be normated into the hip-hop community is to be normated into a complex, and contradictory, music genre. At one end, hip-hop promotes what Strike calls the "bads" of community—sexism, materialism, violence, and the like. And part, but not all, of the reason these "bads"

[2] The italics added for emphasis.

are perpetuated is because hip-hop is an extremely commercialized genre of music, wherein the primary owners of the music companies have an interest in profit-maximization rather than "good" content. In addition, the commercialization of hip-hop requires the music, which primarily comes from people who are poor and oppressed, to be sold to a primarily white audience less interested in the realities of poverty and oppression and more interested in the "bads" of the hip-hop community (Chang & Herc, 2005; Warren & Paulson, 2005). However, at the other end, hip-hop is a power tool for individuals, especially youth who suffer from alienation and anomie, to express themselves and their frustration in a somewhat productive manner. Of course, these are quite general statements, but the point to be made is that the "intellectual communities" of hip-hop are already embedded within particular "goods" and "bads," which are partly caused by larger social problems. Thus, it would be wrong to assume that children should be normated into the hip-hop community without also being taught how to identify and confront the complex problems perpetrating the "bads" of the hip-hop community. This would also entail authentically teaching children the value of democratizing the music industry because such a process could act as a major catalyst for preventing the "bads" of the hip-hop community (Charnas, 2010).

We are far from a just society, which means successful education reform must prepare children to *create* such a society. This requires reengaging the two most important, but neglected, educational questions: *whose knowledge is of most worth?* and *what knowledge is of most worth?* As Apple (1995) illustrated, powerful groups (what he terms *hegemonic blocs*) have an interest in ensuring that schools reproduce unjust social inequalities, which means they have an interest in limiting who and what knowledge is taught to children. This means to prepare children to enter into an "intellectual community" or the larger "quasi-democratic society" requires also preparing them to address the ways that these processes produce unjust power structures. In other words, normative philosophers need to open the black-box of schooling, and theorize about the content of the curriculum—something severely under-addressed.

Hopefully my criticism of Strike will not deter one from engaging with this significant work. If individuals completely neglected my review and just took Strike's advice seriously our educational system would be in a much better place. Nevertheless, since my review focuses on how well this book advances a conception of justice, it is imperative to address these issues. In regards to proposing educational reforms that deepen democracy within education, this book is superb. However, in regards to preparing children to create a society at large that is supportive of human flourishing, and economic democracy, this book falls short. This problem should not fall on the shoulders of Strike alone. Overall those concerned with educational reform would greatly benefit from giving more consideration to the question George Counts (1978) posed to the progressive educational community in 1932: *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* The weight we put behind answering this question shall determine the success of our reform of education.

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