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The Organizer: Some Thoughts for a Future Historian

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I want to point to the significance of organizers—figures who too often are neglected in the history of education. And I want to hail Vito Perrone as a great organizer in a rich U.S. tradition of organizing. We, of course, badly need to document the history of Vito's work at the New School and the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of North Dakota, as well as the history of his involvement with the North Dakota Study Group (NDSG or Group), to say nothing of Vito's work at Harvard and in Boston and some of his special interests, like the peace movement and rural schools. This essay is not that history; it is merely a provisional exercise that may one day help shape the telling of that story.

"Organizers" are men and women (more often men, of course, given the way power functioned in the bad old days) who expound ideas, advance practices, build networks and institutions, and lead and speak for and create constituencies. An organizer is a one-person band whose marching music acts as catalyst and energizer for others. Organizers are distinctive individuals, with their own singular strength, charm, charisma, and persuasiveness—and other teacherly and leaderish traits, to say nothing of faults—but their chief creation always takes a highly social form; they make and lead groups, institutions, movements. Organizers are practitioners—artists, so to speak, in the medium of collective human action: shapers of people who come together in movements and institutions.

Organizers span the political spectrum. The American past offers us many famous conservative or centrist "organizers"—Horace Mann, the founding entrepreneur and systematizer of Massachusetts public education, comes to mind as does William Cody, a once-famous system-building superintendent of schools in Detroit in the progressive era; so does Nicholas Murray Butler, the dictatorial president of

Columbia who was the boss of elite higher education in the early twentieth century. Booker T. Washington acted as the boss of African-American politics and educational networks, though politically Washington was a very complex case. He was an open conservative and secret radical. (We now know, for example, that he preached political resignation to Jim Crow publicly, while secretly financing challenges in the courts to Southern white racism.)

On the pedagogical and social left (not always the same, of course), we have Elizabeth Peabody, of the early kindergarten movement, and Frances Parker—both taking the hugely daring step of treating nineteenth century teachers as professionals who must make personal and intellectual judgments about practice; in the twentieth century, Margaret Haley, the founder of the Chicago teachers' union, was a brilliant organizer; so was the great African-American scholar, intellectual, institution-builder, and trouble-maker, W.E.B. DuBois. And, of course, wherever you turn over the course of the last century, you encounter the towering figure of John Dewey, honorary (and much-reviled) organizer supreme for several generations of teachers, scholars, and radicals. Dewey is also the chief modern theorist of the great themes guiding the organizing tradition on the left: the big ideas that education is about democracy, community, and social justice. Dewey would relish the way that organizers blend theory and practice; in a sense, the organizing tradition is an embodiment of Dewey's pragmatism and social commitments. In our era, Theodore Sizer has played the role of organizer with the Coalition of Essential Schools on one end of the political spectrum, while Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch are current examples of the role on the conservative side.

Any form of education constrains and liberates at the same time. The real political choice is, therefore, never absolute, but rather where one strikes the balance. Vito belongs in the company of brilliant organizers on the American left—those who lean toward the emancipation of students and teachers. Left organizers traditionally link educational and political reform directly to the cause of social justice. Whereas organizers on the right often (though not always) accept and even promote managerial and imperial visions of society and education, those on the left fight back against each generation's version of management and empire in the name of social justice and "democracy"; in pedagogy and politics, they push for more power

placed in the hands of those at the grass roots—teachers, as well as families, workers, and citizens. A parallel, small-d radical democrat to Vito in the past would be Jane Addams, who, though not an educator, used Hull House as a base for organizing on behalf of a vision of the profession of social work as a radical practice of democracy—and an ideal of "professionalism" as a form of middle class radicalism and solidarity with poor and working class people. I think also of Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School, who made what was initially an educational institution founded to preserve local culture and regional activism into the seedbed of union organizing in the South, as well as the nursery for the early civil rights movement—and toward the end of his days used Highlander to launch the South's movements for environmental justice. Deborah Meier, a longtime ally and friend of Vito's, is another contemporary organizer on the left who makes a fresh blend of the old ideas of democracy and community in her work at the Mission Hill School in Boston and in her earlier venture, Central Park East Secondary, in New York—as well as in her efforts to promote alternative schools in New York, Boston, and nationally.

Organizers on the left know that the work is political in the broad sense once defined by George Orwell: "To push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's ideas of the kind of society they should strive after" (1947/1984, p. 390).

In the rich history of organizers on the left, one figure who comes close to Vito is Leonard Covello, the legendary principal of Benjamin Franklin High School in the 1930s and 1940s. One of Vito's most scholarly, and most moving, essays is an extended homage to Covello—the long introduction to the Teachers College Press volume of excerpts from Covello's (1958) brilliant autobiography, *The Heart is the Teacher*. The title of the TC Press volume is, of course, a riff on Covello's title: Vito's book is called *Teacher with a Heart.* In the introduction, Vito lovingly traces Covello's commitments through a long career that played novel variations on the Deweyan themes of democracy, community, social justice, and the blending of theory and practice in a lifetime of action. Vito identifies closely with Covello as an Italian, a product of immigrant history, part of the immigrant under-story often whispered aloud but too seldom written down: the suppressed narrative of the costs of coming to America and pursuing

dreams in a land of vast inequalities and injustice. Covello and Vito share the kinship not only of an Italian identity, but of being the loyal sons of exiled mothers whose hearts were broken by America.

A look at Covello suggests some themes that illuminate the work of organizing; perhaps they shed light on the organizer as the embodiment of a tradition and as a social type.

Let's start with the organizer's marginal status and identity—in Covello's case, belonging yet not belonging, speaking Italian as well as English, fiercely identifying with immigrants. An identity on the margin might be a metaphor for one of his chief traits as an organizer: Covello is a border or boundary crosser. He starts as a working class immigrant who makes it through college, intending to become a university professor, a Romance language instructor, and then finds himself teaching some of the first courses in an urban high school not only in the Italian language, but in Italian history and culture. Later, as a school principal, he opts out of the conventional bureaucratic role in one of the world's largest bureaucracies, the freshly-"rationalized" New York City school system. Instead he is called "Pop" by the students and teachers at his school. Covello redefines the role of principal: He becomes a community organizer. The main goals are to help students and teachers become more powerful; to link the peoples of East Harlem together, especially across the chasms of language, race, class, and immigration; and to connect the strivings in school to politics in such a way that the community gets access to more power and resources. He has the students conduct surveys and develops storefront sites to reach out to the community. One of his crowning achievements as an organizer was the successful campaign to pressure Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia to build a new school building. This was a product not only of rallying the school and its neighborhoods, but of Covello's long engagement with New York City politics at the electoral level—one of his favorite students and protégés was Vito Marcantonio, the immensely popular radical Congressman. (Another was Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who once told me that "Pop" had inspired Moynihan's very first political act—a motion he proposed in the school's student assembly to condemn separate blood collections for white and Negro soldiers in the World War II army.)

"Community" is another big theme for Covello. As a practitioner, he works on this in small groups (classrooms, clubs), but also at a larger level: as a builder of coalitions of groups, from neighborhoods to the whole city. Initially, Covello starts as an Italian immigrant nationalist, passionate to help students maintain their identity and pride. (His own name had been changed by a thoughtless and probably racist teacher from Coviello to Covello.) This insistence on the dignity and worth of language and culture remains a theme all through his career—to this end, he was pressing these matters in political alliances with the new Puerto Rican immigrants in the later decades of his life. They needed support, he argued, to create a version of their community in the city.

Covello keeps both kinds of community in mind: The projects he praises are of students doing community studies but also becoming a small community of inquirers. He can see the school itself as a community, but also East Harlem and the city itself as a community embracing what Whitman called "a nation of nations." All the various forms of community are linked, marked, and defined by conversation: The organizer creates spaces in which all voices are heard. This comes out powerfully in Covello's response to the Harlem Race Riots during World War II, when he walked the halls of his building and the streets of Harlem, pleading for kids and grownups to come together to listen to each other—to talk—in order to overcome racial hatred and racism: The peoples who are hungry cannot afford to fight one another, he argued.

As a practitioner, Covello enacts in practice Dewey's fundamental axiom: that all learning is profoundly social, and that conversation is not only the chief medium of learning, but also, along with action, one of its chief ends. It is no coincidence that organizers like Covello and Vito make conversation a supreme medium of both education and political action.

Covello was famous for keeping the school open at all hours and filling it with community groups of every kind: language clubs, sports, political groups, all and any clubs. Many of these groups were in one way or another involved in making culture; this is another of Covello's big themes: Formally and informally, he saw that education is not only a matter of helping people to become more powerful; it is also about creating spaces and places for them to enact culture—to

take part in the culture and traditions of their group, but also to create wider meanings to share in a public school community and in politics to create (ultimately) "a nation of nations." The insight that real education, lasting education, involves the active making of culture and participating in it is one of Covello's deep themes. He testifies that culture and creativity are also in the end, as Orwell said, political acts. Here, too, he is John Dewey's heir as a public school practitioner: He created significant public school versions of Dewey's ideal school as "community"; as an "embryonic democracy," his school was able to promote creativity and start students on the road to the better culture Dewey argued for in his masterpiece, *Art as Experience*.[1]

Another theme Covello enacts is critical professionalism. He was the heir of Jane Addams and Francis Parker and Margaret Haley and John Dewey in seeking to create a different definition of professionalism—a populist vision of professionalism rooted in a middle class radicalism that sought solidarity with poor and working class families. (Covello knew of Addams' work and was himself inspired by the work of New York settlements.) In the age of what the historian David Tyack called the "administrative progressives," the builders of our current bureaucracies and professions and systems of management, testing, and credentials, Covello re-imagined the role of the principal in terms of passionate personal values and commitments, in his case the village and familial values of the Italian immigrant community. It was no accident that he was called "Pop" by the students. It was not just cute and funny; it points to the way that he was, like so many immigrants, redefining the American game and revitalizing old country values and ways in new professional and political settings. At the dawn of professionalism and bureaucracy, Covello was imagining a kind of grass roots version of professionalism that would truly serve the people. This vision course reflected his own temperament and personality—his charm, energy, and wit. But Covello's personal appeal and impact can't be separated from his radical vision: Unlike the new "scientific" administrative professionalism, Covello put personalism and personal relationships at the heart of his vision of teaching. And at the core of his conception of administration was a sense of the school as a community of shared relationships, meanings, passions, conversations. On both teaching and administration, Covello parted company with the new impersonal world being constructed by the "administrative

progressives." As a practitioner, he enacted the democratic counter-professionalism of Jane Addams, Margaret Haley, and John Dewey, insisting that personal relations and community and the promotion of a new democracy were the heart of teaching.

Each of these values and roles and ways of operating—border-crossing, the variations on the theme of community, culture-making as a central value, critical professionalism—are a subset of a larger commitment: to that protean and Whitmanesque dream of democracy and democratic power. The purpose of organizing was the same as the purpose of education: to help the people gain power.

I suggest that a future historian start with Covello's big themes when tackling Vito's life and work. Of course the two figures are different; they lived and took part in different eras. But the tradition they worked in and the social role they share may prove illuminating.

Vito's work at the University of North Dakota in the 1970s is one of the shining chapters in the often dim record of U.S. teacher education. The chapters in Charles Silberman's (1972) classic *Crisis in the Classroom* are homage to a remarkable creation: an education school intimately linked to a vital network of schools and teachers. Vito created a reformist model of teacher education at a public state university which was intertwined with an ambitious reform of the schools in the state. This intertwining of schools and teacher education—the way Vito in effect used education to "organize" the entire state of North Dakota and make it into an educational model for the nation—has often been at the back of my mind and those of my colleagues at Michigan State University as we struggle (not always so successfully) to make teacher education more democratic, more ambitious for children's minds, and more connected to classrooms in schools and local communities.

I'd love to know more about the details of Vito's role in shaping the New School and its networks—particularly the political side of the story. What did Vito do to win citizens and school boards over? What about the teachers and principals who dissented from what was clearly a revived version of old-time "progressive education"? I have a sense that Vito himself, who is such an impressive and friendly guy—it helps that he was a notable wrestler at MSU and has coached sports—spent a great deal of time talking to groups of people across the state. Conversation, Covello would remind us, is the end as well as the means

of organizing and educating. In North Dakota, you can readily practice what election experts call “retail politics”—meeting and conversing with folks at the grass roots. This is part of the picture that will need to be filled in by our future historian. So is the subsequent history of the New School and its program, faculty, and students. This is not the only instance in the history of education where we lack long-term portraits of institutions and change over time.

Vito is known far better for his role of founder and ongoing catalyst for the North Dakota Study Group, a national (despite its name) network of scholars, activists, and teachers who have met annually for over 30 years. This organization and its members have had some influence on U.S. and international education and have contributed much to ongoing debates and the reform of teaching.[2]

A few years ago, the Group held its meeting at Harvard so that Vito could attend without travel to hear, among other things, a panel deliver one of Harvard’s Askwith Lectures in his honor. “Teachers never stop teaching,” Vito wrote in *Letters to Teachers* (1991). His remarkable recovery after a debilitating stroke left him near death and without speech, showed this—and his determination. He stood before the gathering to deliver hard-practiced remarks while the audience followed along with his text. He greeted friends, came to all sessions, managed to make himself clear when he took issue with content, and rejoined the long conversation he has generated and kept passionate and full of hope for so many years.

Throughout its history, the NDSG has amounted to an ongoing seminar on democratic possibilities in U.S. and world education, branching out to include related issues such as racial tensions and problems in schools and classrooms—issues of culture, class, immigration, and gender—but always returning to the fundamental themes of accountability and assessment that are so pressing today in the age of No Child Left Behind. In effect, the NDSG has been a democratic conscience of U.S. education, constantly reminding those in the mainstream of alternatives and possibilities, and offering criticism and alternative examples of practice in the light of its enduring concerns with democracy and the estate of childhood.

In periods of democratic school reform—the 1970s and 1990s, for example—the ideas of the group significantly influenced the educational mainstream. The progressive, democratic vision has from

time to time captured what the Chinese call "the mandate of heaven." In other periods, when the U.S. reform pendulum has swung away from children's minds and teachers' and children's voices in schools and away from a focus on equality and social justice, the group has offered alternative paths and thinking as well as criticism.

The meetings began in the early '70s with about 30 attendees. Now the meetings are kept to roughly about 100 people to maintain the sense of intimacy and enable conversation and an opportunity to participate. (Of course, the anniversary meeting was larger, as Harvard honored Vito Perrone.) Not only the size has changed, but the composition of the group has as well. Classroom teachers were few until the early '80s, when invited teacher panels became a feature each year. Now many teachers at all levels attend as regulars. It says a lot about the U.S. and its managerial traditions in school reform that the NDSG may be one of the few groups in the country where classroom teachers meet on an equal basis with other educational professionals. Until the early '80s, the group was primarily white. Now about a fourth of the group is of color, with people of color taking roles as leaders and as speakers in plenary sessions. The group has struggled and continues to struggle as it tries to have frank and candid conversations, deepen understanding of race and ethnicity, and solidify the connections with attendees of color—difficult but unfinished work as the U.S. continues to take halting steps both backward and forward on the American dilemma.

The network of friendships and professional connections is strong and grows stronger each year for those who attend regularly. Home groups welcome and create a place for newcomers, often young teachers. Those who participate currently include new teachers, veteran teachers, university professors, community activists, independent scholars, undergraduates, deans, foundations program officers, and principals. This yearly national (and at times international) three-day gathering is the lightning rod for generating energy for individuals to carry on their local work.

The work of the NDSG has never been more timely. In the U.S. we witness an attack on the very idea of public, democratic education. Across the planet, the issues of social justice in education and peace in the world have never been more urgent. Vito's gift to us all looks less and less like a dated legacy and more like a call for action today.

This essay is clearly a call to document the work that Vito has done with the NDSG over the years. Some of this is now happening with an oral history grant from the Spencer Foundation. (Kathe Jervis and Arthur Tobier have been the brains behind this project.) But more needs to be done, in particular, in relation to Vito's role in the story. This is where we need my future historian.

All I argue here is that this future historian will be helped in the work if he or she follows the thread of the organizing tradition. In creating both the New School and the NDSG, Vito, I think, played variations on the themes I've identified in Covello: border raids on the conventional boundaries of the educational world, crossing boundaries of disciplines, groups, and institutions. We see the creation of community as an essential thread in the work, from fashioning a new education school to building a professional group that in some sense tries to mirror the give and take and the inclusiveness and the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood of a good democratic classroom or school. As with Covello, we see variations on the theme of community at all levels, and with Vito as our subject we are also never far from the importance of good talk and conversation. The future historian will also see the Deweyan and Covello-ish (if that word is allowed) emphasis on the crucial importance of culture-making: in the classes in the New School; in the conversational turn in the NDSG meetings; and in the constant emphasis on creativity, stories, and passion. When we have better documentation, we will see Vito's counter-professionalism at work in the New School's and the Center for Teaching and Learning's close links to small local school communities and the grass roots, and in the NDSG's constant insistence on creating space for the "voices" of students and teachers; we also see it in the 30-year opposition on the part of the Group to the reigning U.S. style of making important educational decisions about individual students or schools on the basis of standardized tests and single-shot, high-stakes tests. Seeing Vito as an organizer will help us see parallel figures at the time—Lillian Weber, for example, whose career as an organizer in New York mirrors so many of Vito's themes. (Weber was, of course, one of the influential early members of the NDSG.) Throughout, the organizing perspective will let us see the way that Vito Perrone has been a drum major for democracy, taking large numbers of people along with him in one of the rich democratic chapters in U.S. educational history.

I hope this essay leads to further work on Vito. In the meantime, I hope it will inspire many to start thinking about the different sorts of organizing we need for a new era. We have never needed a new generation of organizers so much.

Appendix: Notes on The New School and the NDSG

The New School

Vito's work as organizer has mainly taken place in two settings. The first, which I would like to know more about, is the invention of the New School of Behavioral Studies (and its successor, the Center for Teaching and Learning) at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A future historian of U.S. education in the 1960s and 1970s, interested in classroom reform and the story of efforts to advance "progressive" and "democratic" versions of teaching and learning, might profitably start with Charles Silberman's fascinating book, *Crisis in the Classroom* (1970). Silberman's text is, in part, a summation of the radical '60s critiques of U.S. education (the radical critique moving into the mainstream, so to speak, for Silberman's work was financed by the Carnegie Corporation), and in part a thoughtful hymn of praise to the burgeoning late '60s movement called (by some) "open education." The study itself reflected the enormous ferment in classroom practice at the local level in the late 1960s and on into the 1970s.

It was originally supposed to be a study of teacher education; but Silberman explains he found so few exemplary institutions of teacher education that he concentrated on vignettes of the kind of classroom reform that was then sweeping many U.S. schools. One exception to his general condemnation of U.S. teacher education was his glowing description of the University of North Dakota's New School for Behavioral Studies in Education, which was founded by a vital young dean named Vito Perrone in 1966—"easily the most exciting teacher education program in the United States" (Silberman, 1970, p. 473).

Silberman attacked most U.S. teacher education for its failures—teacher candidates' lack of a solid liberal education, the failure to offer students alternatives to conventional classroom teaching, the general aimlessness, and lack of real purpose. Purpose, Silberman argued, doesn't come from a course or group of courses—it has to be the product of a program of studies, a whole body of experiences that is itself infused with purpose. The deepest criticism of American teacher education is that it doesn't touch the life of its students—it doesn't help them find delight in what they are doing and the ways in which a life in teaching becomes fulfilled. Beyond inspiration and soul, Silberman looked for a set of practical experiences that would help students become students of teaching and be more likely to grow in the profession. He imagined an institution that would, in its own teaching, act as a live model of what classroom teaching can and should be—and that also introduced students to classrooms in which teachers were committed to reformist practice.

Two of the qualities most strikingly absent in American public schools were to be found in North Dakota—a program working to help students "acquire the qualities of mind and behavior which will assist them in nurturing the creative tendencies in the young and in introducing a more individualized mode of instruction into the schools of North Dakota."

The New School was the child of a plan to reorganize the schools of a state that was badly lagging in the educational parade. A statewide study of education had found that a majority (59%) of the state's teachers lacked a college degree. Certification requirements set forth as recently as the 1950s had called for no more than two years of college for a teaching certificate. The reorganization plan proposed not only to bring the state's teachers up to a new minimum, but to reorganize the elementary schools to promote the "informal" styles of teaching and learning that were just being popularized.

In the wake of the statewide study, the New School and its Dean had a mandate: "Seldom do teacher education programs, even those that are considered the most innovative, have a significant impact upon public education," Vito and his colleagues wrote in a paper delivered in 1969. "Typically, institutions of higher learning are isolated from the communities in which they reside … (the New School) … must bridge the isolation that traditionally exists between the university and local communities" (cited in Silberman, 1970, p. 474).

The main bridge was a teacher exchange program in which cooperating school districts sent their “less than degree” teachers to the New School for as much undergraduate work as they needed to earn a BA degree. The New School, in turn, sent its MA degree teacher education candidates to these school districts to take over the vacant classrooms. The year-long teaching internship comprised the bulk of their work for the degree. The internship was preceded and followed by summer sessions at the New School. Out in the schools, interns were supervised by clinical professors assigned to each region of the state as well as by the New School’s professors and staff. The New School also conducted summer programs for principals. After the first sessions in 1969, the principals (some of whom had started out hostile to the reform package) asked Perrone for more workshops during the school year.

Thus, at the New School, experienced teachers, many of them in their 40s and 50s, attended college with young undergraduate teachers-to-be. The program aimed to teach its students the same way it would have them teach kids. The New School modeled a mix of independent study and small classes and seminars in which students were expected to take a lot of initiative. Inquiry and discovery were the watchwords. I would love to know more about the curriculum. The school offered a two-year sequence in “Creative Expression,” which included work in drama, dance, writing, painting, sculpting, and other forms of expression. Silberman quotes Perrone: “If we cannot make every teacher personally creative, we can at least make every teacher sensitive to the creativity in her children so that she will nourish their attempts” (1970, p. 476).

Silberman has fun doing a number of his trademark vignettes of New School classrooms: the essays on “why aren’t we all one color,” student “junk” sculptures on the theme “would you believe?,” haiku, short poems, and writings. Very much in the spirit of the late ’60s and early ’70s, “Creative Expression” was a course intended to help teachers become more open and flexible. In the “Creative Drama” segment of the course, students wrote short plays and skits with sound effects and props and then performed them for children in neighboring schools. The group came to be known as “The Burlap Bag Players,” because students watched each actor in the group arrive carrying a burlap bag containing props, accessories, and a basic costume of black slacks, black sweater, and black ballet slippers.

In organizational terms the school, which numbered around 300 students in 1970-71, was a single unit, with no departments. Faculty members from a variety of fields jointly shaped the total academic and professional program. The effort to reconnect teacher education with liberal education evoked, Silberman said, an extraordinary response from the arts and sciences faculty at the rest of the University of North Dakota. Departments which had given up on the earlier school of education were cooperating enthusiastically with the New School—the chair of the psychology department was teaching 1/4 time in the New School, and the English department released some of its best faculty for joint appointments with the New School.

What struck Silberman most about the whole enterprise was the successful effort to see teacher education as a whole. In the conventional teacher education program, he says (and this is, of course, still largely true today) there is a chasm between subject matter courses and "methods" or teacher education courses. The New School was making a bold effort to integrate content and methods. Perrone and others argued that students gain a deeper understanding of any subject if they simultaneously pursue the learning of it with an effort to learn how it might be taught to children. Teaching experiences—some brief, some as long as four weeks—were built into the required courses in "Modes of Communication" and "The Nature and Conditions of Learning."

The network of participating schools provided fruitful settings for learning to teach, Silberman reported, because students were placed in classrooms that reflected the philosophy and approach they were supposed to be learning. Thus, undergraduate students were placed with teaching interns who had taken over the classrooms vacated by the less-than-degree teachers. Both worked under the supervision of a clinical professor in the field.

The New School started in the first flush of the revival of progressive and democratic education in the '60s. The crisis in certification was the catalyst for a whole series of changes that led to the creation of networks and new institutions as well as a ferment of classroom reform. The *Zeitgeist*, created by a heady mix of cultural revolution, "open education," and the combined political force of the civil rights and anti-war movements, was surely part of the mix. But the examples of British classroom reform promoted by myself in the

New Republic and by others at the time also spoke with some urgency to people in North Dakota. In many of the small schools of the state, the conventional graded patterns of instruction were uneconomical and impractical; the new small group and individualized emphasis in classroom teaching and learning and organization seemed a good fit for ungraded rural and small town schools. The passion and vitality of the New School program looked like a terrific opportunity and a great bargain: a way to expand the ratio of students to energetic and committed teachers—and to do so without a cheap crash program or meaningless paper credentials. The veteran teachers coming back to the schools were, for the most part, really enthusiastic. And the new young teachers were passionate and fresh. The British and other examples of "open education" had, Silberman argues, another special lure to a region feeling itself falling behind the rest of the country. Many saw the new creative and cosmopolitan ways embodied in "open education" as offering the children of a backward state passports to modernity: greater facility and ease with language, better practical arithmetic and math skills, greater powers of creative expression, broadening horizons, and the ability—above all—to respond to change.

Vito's ongoing passion for the work of teacher education at Harvard has also been an inspiration to all of us in the field. As leader of Harvard's small but symbolically important teacher education program, Vito has helped an elite university keep alive a message about the importance of staying in touch with the values of practice and the grass roots—and his presence has been a powerful recruiting agency to bring bright and well-off students and those who despaired of doing significant work in democratic education back to the work of classrooms and kids. Vito's work in particular Boston schools has continued to serve as an example to us in all teacher education programs in big universities not to stray too far from teachers and kids and classrooms and their communities as we struggle to make a field-based teacher education program work on behalf of democracy. He continues to inspire those of us committed to teacher education in schools. Here's to the day when some smart historian will make Vito's work in North Dakota a model for teacher education in some better future.

North Dakota Study Group

The study group began in 1972, when Vito, then Dean of the new Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of North Dakota, brought together educators from many parts of the U.S. to discuss common concerns about accountability of schools and assessment of children. Many in what initially was called the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation were concerned about the narrowness of the visions of accountability and assessment that were becoming popular with policymakers and reformers; they wanted to share what they believed were more useful, fair, and democratic ways to document and assess children's learning. They also held a closely related vision of active learning and what constituted good classroom practice. The group was especially concerned about an issue that remains relevant 30 years later—the impact of ill-judged schemes of quantitative assessment on good early childhood programs and the primary years of school. They were afraid that many of the good environments for young children that were a product of a wave of extraordinary classroom reform were now at risk.

Vito has often reminded the group at its yearly three-day meeting to serve "large purposes," and it has. Vito himself has been a constant presence, except in the years when the stroke put him out of commission. In the past, he opened and closed the sessions; and for many years he set the agenda and planned speakers and schedules and sessions. A few years before the stroke, a planning committee started doing some of the work that Vito had always done. Now the planning committee is, in effect, the administration of the group in between annual meetings.

Over the years, members have provided ideas and materials for researchers, teachers, parents, school administrators, and policymakers (within state education agencies, within the U.S. Office of Education, and abroad for progressives in many countries). Members have linked educational thought to many wider currents of democratic activism in and out of education. Decade after decade, the NDSG has encouraged many people to re-examine a range of issues about schools and schooling and childhood and race and class and ethnicity. Meetings and publications and informal conversations within its networks ranged over issues of children's thinking, children's language and art,

curriculum, support systems for teachers, inservice education, teacher education, the school's relationship to a wider community, and, increasingly, issues relating to the diversity of America's schoolchildren: immigration, language issues, and the problems of racism in U.S. society.

The roster of names linked with the group reads like a Who's Who of democratic thinkers and activists. Among the central early figures were Vito Perrone, Ken Haskins, Pat Carini, and Lillian Weber. Teachers were scarcely represented in early meetings; increasingly, teachers and activists of color, and Latino, Asian, and immigrant classroom teachers from city schools, have made the meetings more and more diverse in all sorts of ways. Early on, Joseph Suina and his Native American colleagues from the University of New Mexico enlarged the conversation beyond a discussion of Blacks and Whites. Latino voices today include a vital group from the Llando Grande Center for Research and Development in Elsa, Texas; this group has also been the vehicle for video documentation of the meeting for the last several years.

Over time, the group has also invited many distinguished speakers to link the agenda to important currents or points of view not generated within the group. In many ways the NDSG is livelier now than ever as we attempt to deepen and broaden the national dialogue on education and social justice in our classrooms, schools, communities, and across the world.

The written records of the group reflect an extraordinarily thoughtful, passionate, ongoing conversation about the possibilities of democracy in education, and the changing climate of three decades of turbulent educational history.

Monographs have been distributed all over the world; many have been repeatedly reprinted. No monographs have been published since 1996, not for lack of funds or outlets, but because the increasingly clear voices of the members along with greater technological ease produced more options to publish in other places. For example, Teachers College Press now frequently publishes the work of NDSG members. Myself, Kathe Jervis, Arthur Tobier, and others have been working with money from the Spencer Foundation to do oral histories of the group—the older folks, particularly, but also some of the younger members in urban and rural schools now. And Brenda Engel has recently

published *Holding Values* (Heineman, 2005), tying the group's work in the past to issues of the present and presenting a wonderful series of short sketches of its varied work.

The NDSG is, after all, a study group; conversation predominates over plenary session lectures. The tone of meetings is usually serious, intense—the group often addresses a particular text or question—and yet informal and even raucous. The group undertakes close textual readings in small groups, ranging widely, for example, from W.E.B. DuBois' (1903/2003) *Souls of Black Folk* to Vito Perrone's (1998) *Teacher With a Heart*: *Reflections on Leonard Covello and Community*. Small groups also meet to tell stories of their own experiences with assessment and standards and immigration in order, as Patricia Carini reminds us, to create a public record—positioning our storytelling and school evaluation in wider society.

Vito and Lillian Weber were two crucial early figures in the Group, both operating in the Covello mode: As organizers, they practiced border crossing, fashioning new versions of community that often reflect older values, always intent on freeing students and teachers to make genuine culture, always critical of the reigning models of professionalism and school organization, and always, always, Whitmanesque in their pursuit of the vague ideal of democracy, equality, and shared democratic power, even in what looked like the worst of times. Their spirit of creativity, and the courage with which they invented education afresh, remain our inspiration. With luck, and a few good historians to document them, they will continue to inspire the new generation of organizers this nation so badly needs.

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Endnotes

[1] Dewey's commitment to democracy is the main theme of the magisterial book by Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. For samples of Dewey's writings on these themes see Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," in *John Dewey, Early Works*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univeristy Press, 1971, and Mayhew, K. and Edwards, A. C., *The Dewey School*, New York: Atherton Press, 1966 (original 1936).

[2] See the wonderful introduction to Brenda Engel's new book, *Holding Values* (Heinemann, 2005) for an excellent short history of the North Dakota Study Group.

Joseph Featherstone has been a founder and longtime faculty leader in one of a cluster of acclaimed field-based teacher education programs at Michigan State University. He has taught at Brown and Harvard, served as principal of the Commonwealth School in Boston, and was for many years an associate editor of the New Republic*. It was in the* New Republic *that his famous series on British primary school appeared in the late 1960s. The series was influential in classroom reform at the time and played a role in the creation of the New School at the University of North Dakota. His most recent book on education is* Dear Josie, Witnessing the Hopes and Failures of Democratic Education *(Teachers College Press, 2003), which has just been translated into Chinese by the East China Normal University Press in Shanghai. He is also a poet (*Brace's Cove*, New Issues Poetry, 2000).*