

WorldCanvass: Why School? Education and Social Transformation

Part 1

- Joan Kjaer: Hello, this is WorldCanvass, from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer, and we're happy to have you with us here at MERGE in downtown Iowa City. This is the kickoff event of the 2019 Provost's Global Forum, the UI's premier annual event focused on international and global issues. The forum brings together experts from the faculty and leading voices from a variety of areas to raise awareness about and contribute to debate on the foremost issues in globalization facing us today.
- Joan Kjaer: This year's forum, Why School? International Perspectives on Education and Social Transformation, will examine education in a global context, both as a reflection of social norms and as a powerful force for change. The public is encouraged to attend forum events, and you can find a full schedule at the International Programs' website, which is international.uiowa.edu. A highlight event will be the Joel Barkan memorial lecture, given by Supriya Baily on Friday at 7:00 in the Hyatt Place hotel. We hope you can attend that.
- Joan Kjaer: We're honored to have a very special group of UI faculty and international guests on today's program. In this first segment, I'd like to welcome Amanda Thein, associate dean and professor in the University of Iowa College of Education. Thank you for being here.
- Amanda Thein: Thanks, Joan.
- Joan Kjaer: And next to her is David Bills, professor in the UI College of Education. Thank you much, David.
- David Bills: Thanks for having me.
- Joan Kjaer: So, the purpose of schooling in society. I guess that's kind of the main question we're asking. Our society, other societies. How does it work? Why does it work that way? What changes might be afoot? And how does education affect social transformations of one sort or another? It's obviously a big topic, and I know the forum will be awfully interesting. But Amanda, here in this program, I wonder if you could give us an overview, sort of an introduction to the notion that school both reflects or exhibits social values and philosophies, and then also sometimes nudges us toward social transformation.
- Amanda Thein: Sure, I'd be happy to do that. I think that the Provost's Global Forum, Why School? is going to give us a chance to really think about the ways in which schools reflect some of the ambitions and goals that different societies across the globe have, and also sometimes replicates, reproduces some of the problems that various societies have. And I think you can see that, for instance, in US schools, which is where I have the most expertise.

Amanda Thein: I think we often think of US schools as great equalizers for students. It's a place where we imagine that all students can succeed, all students can have opportunities to start a successful adulthood. You see that in the names of some of our national reform policies, for instance, Every Child Succeeds, No Child Left Behind. So, I think that some of those ideas about K-12 schools as being places of equity, and where everyone has a chance to succeed, are really grounded in some of our American ideals. Ideas about fairness, ideas about equity, and some ideas that are problematic, about meritocracy, about individualism, about the idea that any person can succeed if they try hard and if they persist. Sort of a pulling yourself up from your bootstraps kind of thinking.

Amanda Thein: And I think that when we look at what happens in US schools, we see that yes, in some cases, schooling in the K-12 arena does allow students a lot of opportunities to succeed that they might not have otherwise had, or to help them move across social classes, for instance. But that's actually pretty few and far between, and our schools often do sort of create generations of students that look a lot like their parents. And there really are inequalities in the ways in which schools provide access for various groups of students.

Amanda Thein: That's not to say that there's not room for transformation, but this is something that we get kind of trapped in, that schools are reflecting both our ambitions, but also reproducing and replicating our problems.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah, and it's interesting, when you think about some of the things parents might wish for their families, for their kids. I'd like to have a nice neighborhood school. I'm going to buy this house, because my kids can go to that school. And some people, of course, don't have the mobility or the ability to move to whatever neighborhood they think would have the best school, but there have been many, many initiatives, and continue to be initiatives, both within communities and maybe state and national initiatives, to try to bring some of those different neighborhoods together. Those have had mixed success, wouldn't you say?

Amanda Thein: Yeah, I think that they have, and I think that you pinpointed some of the ways in which it's difficult for all students to have equal access to high-quality education in US schools. People tend to like their neighborhood schools, and they want to be in their neighborhoods, but because on a basic level, schools are funded in large part through local tax revenue, and so more affluent neighborhoods tend to have schools that have ... they're better resourced. That have newer curricular materials, that offer a wider range of courses, that have smaller class sizes, that have all kinds of extras that other schools might not.

Amanda Thein: There are lots of solutions that we've tried. We have tried busing, actually with some success. There's research that suggests that busing, and sort of a forced kind of integration of students across socioeconomic groups could be successful. But again, it's inconvenient, and people like their neighborhoods. So, that's one of the reasons why that hasn't been so successful.

Amanda Thein: Other things that people have tried, one common effort that some larger districts have tried is the school choice initiative. I'm thinking of one larger district that I know about, where you can come up with a list of five schools in the district that you might like your child to go to, and one of them needs to be your neighborhood school, but then through a series of lotteries and wait lists, one of those schools will be selected for your child.

Amanda Thein: Now, there's a lot of positive in that. You have some ways of choosing what you think is the best school for your child, and movement, in terms of if you're in a school with concentrated poverty, you might be able to move your child somewhere else, to a school that's more diverse, for instance.

Amanda Thein: Some of the problems come in how easy it is to access to those different kinds of schools. So, for instance, in the district that I'm thinking of, you would need to know how to access this form, and fill out this form, in order to actually put your kids into this choice system, which is a challenging process, especially for parents who might not have their own successful experiences with schooling, or haven't had a lot of experiences in institutions related to education in general. Parents who are English language-learners would be another group.

Amanda Thein: You also have to have time and resources to visit schools, to even know which schools you'd like your child to go to. If you were to actually get into a school that was one of your choice schools that's across the district, that might mean driving your child, rather than having transportation or having them walk to their neighborhood school. So, sometimes in those efforts, the people who benefit the most who are already in a pretty good school for their child, or who have the resources to move their child across a district.

Amanda Thein: We have some interesting ideas going in Iowa City. One is with pairing schools. Our high schools and middle schools are relatively socioeconomically diverse in this town, but our elementary schools are not, in large part because they're neighborhood schools, and they're affiliated with neighborhoods that are either more affluent or less affluent.

Amanda Thein: But because of the size of our town, and because of where neighborhoods are located, it might be possible to take two elementary schools and pair them, and have all of the K through three students in one school, all of the four through six in another school, and create a kind of diversity through that effort. I don't know where we are I thinking about that at this point, but that's one idea that's been floated in Iowa City.

Joan Kjaer: Thank you. That gives us a good start. David, I want to move down to you, now. You indicated, when we were talking before the program, that the goals of education have shifted from common and public good to more of a private good. Tell me what you mean by that.

David Bills: Sure. I think this whole idea that what school should be doing, which is the prominent idea we have now, that school should be there to advance people's economic wellbeing, and promote economic development, and everything like that, those are really very recent ideas, in a lot of ways. I mean, if you would have asked people 200 years ago if they thought school should get their kids ahead, they would have had no idea what in the world you were talking about. Schools, for a long time, I think, were basically ways for elite people to sort of pass on their privileges. It was a very small range of people who went to higher education at all.

David Bills: I think over time, that's sort of morphed into different things. I think what happened then, and this is true around the world, I think, is education became more of a way for nation-building. What Sweden wanted to do was build little Swedish citizens, and what Germany wanted to do was build little German citizens, and what the United States wanted to do was build little United States citizens. And that was a major ... it's still a major part of what education does, I think, in much of the world.

David Bills: I think later then, there's sort of a second movement, which is more toward education for building a workforce. And that wasn't so much aimed at individuals, I think, but more how do you build a society that's productive and prosperous, and what role does education have to do with all of that?

David Bills: I think what's happened more recently, and I guess this is what I find troubling in a lot of ways, that Amanda talked about this quite a bit, is school is more and more seen as just sort of an investment that parents make in their kids to advance their economic ... and we've seen this in the news over the last few days. A lot of things happened there. The purpose of education has shifted from being something that really is for the benefit of the society, and increasingly more towards the benefit of individuals.

David Bills: So, you see things like students increasingly defining themselves and being defined as customers, which I think is a really odd way to think about people that should be learning the culture and the society, and the basic math and science and everything else. So, those things. It seems to me the purpose of education has changed over time, and there's pendulums that go back and forth over time. But it seems to have swung awfully far in one direction right now.

David Bills: And I guess, too, talking about education and economic development and things like that, and I'm a promoter of that. I think it's a good thing for education to contribute to economic development, and it does. You look at [inaudible 00:11:30] all over the world, and there's no doubt that more schooling means a more prosperous economy.

David Bills: I think what troubles me a bit is that you have to talk about community development at the same time you talk about economic development. How do you build communities that are ... I think it's just as important to invest in the library as it is in ... anything that educates people, even beyond school bounds

is, I think, part of economic development, and that should, I think, get more attention.

Joan Kjaer: Do we still trust schools to create these experts who can solve our problems? I mean, do we have faith that coming out of our schools are the people who can address current and future needs?

David Bills: That's a good question. I think it's a really troubling question right now, too. I saw a report that came out just today. The PEW Charitable Trust, I think, did a survey that showed, I won't say which political party, one of the two political parties, the majority of people in that party actually report that they don't trust higher education to do the right things. That, to me, is really, really discouraging. When you see that more Americans believe in astrology than believe in global warming.

David Bills: And I think it's a mistake to trust experts, sort of unreflectively, and unproblematically, and you should challenge experts. You should. But at the other time, it saves time. They are experts, and they are people, science does matter. Evidence does matter. And think the extent to which we've sort of gotten away with that, or got away from that, the idea that there is something to be learned from people that have advanced training and advanced knowledge. I mean, it should be taken with some ... those people have gotten us in trouble in the past, too, but I think this willingness that we see more and more to distrust science, to distrust evidence, and distrust education, I think, is really something that we should be concerned with.

David Bills: And not only higher ed, but I think K-12 schooling. K-12 schooling comes in for a lot of criticism. I think by any measure, the quality of teaching now is better than it's ever been. I don't think it's even close. My kids have a much better educational experience than I did at the same age. So, yeah, I think we need to support whatever it takes to get people to believe in science, and believe in education, believe in knowledge, those sorts of things, again.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah, and we're using schools and education as very broad terms, but there are obviously different kinds of schools. There is a lot of talk these days about the emphasis I think we need to make on STEM at various points along the way, and then there is also considerable talk, which again to me seems reasonable, about recognizing the value of community college, and helping to educate people for some of those lines of work that are perhaps considered trades rather than a different kind of profession. Do you see this as a good movement? Either.

David Bills: Do I ...

Joan Kjaer: I mean, the concentrating on not only, say, a four-year college degree, or a PhD, or something that has that sort of framework, but rather the more directed trade schools, those sorts of things.

David Bills: Oh, yeah. When I say I think more education is good for everybody, I'm by no means talking traditional four-year colleges and universities, because there's a lot of ways to get the sort of education people need. Not everybody should go to a four-year school. I think community colleges, trade schools, apprenticeships, I think those are all completely valid and valuable ways for people to learn things.

David Bills: Again, we talked about, I think different public institutions, they have an educational role we should value more. I mentioned libraries, but all sorts of different civic organizations and community groups and things like that. Adult education, I think, is really undervalued in a lot of ways.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. So, what are some of the biggest problems with the educational landscape in the States these days? We hear a lot of talk about what's happening with the secretary of education, for example, at the federal level, but we know that there are community efforts, there are state efforts. There's a core curriculum. There are a number of things that are happening throughout the society that, there are attempts being made to address schooling in America. And what do you think are some of the more positive ones, and what concerns you?

Amanda Thein: I have a thought, and this is really at the higher ed level, and it relates a little bit to what David was talking about. I think, on the one hand, we are making some real efforts to think more about what our students need from education. So, for instance, I see this, as an associate dean for graduate studies in graduate programs, that rather than assuming that all of our students are here to become professors, all of our doctoral students, for instance, are here to become professors, we're thinking more broadly about what a PhD is, and what it could do for students, and what are various kinds of employment students can seek with a PhD? Where can they work beyond just at a university?

Amanda Thein: At the same time, I feel concerned in some ways that we've moved away from an emphasis on education for education's sake, and sort of the intrinsic value of coming to a university to explore lots of different perspectives on issues that matter, to learn from different kinds of people, to have rich dialogue with faculty and other students. I think that there's a tension for me, and I want to serve our students in the best way that I can, in terms of preparing them for careers that will be fulfilling for them, that are realistic in terms of employment. At the same time, I want to protect the idea that there's value in higher education in and of itself.

Joan Kjaer: And then, there's the cost of education, particularly higher ed, that is obviously of importance in public dialogue these days. Everyone's concerned about it. People at university are concerned about what it costs. And President Harreld has reflected on the multi-decade disinvestment by the state of Iowa, for example, in its universities. It worries me, as a member of the public. I don't know if there are good ideas out there that either of you could speak to about how we can help students manage the cost of college education.

- David Bills: I don't know if I have a direct ... I might answer that by saying something different entirely. You've heard each of us talk quite a lot about different ways that education increases the amount of inequality over time. And it does that. There are always schools that are put together that advantage some groups more than other groups.
- David Bills: But having said that, I think it's also true that education is probably the most equal social institution you can find. They're much more equal than family life is, or than economic life is, or political life. And I think it's worth asking the question of what it would be like if we didn't have schools, and I think we might be whole lot more unequal than we are now. I think, if anything, the net benefit of education on making people's lives more equal is probably very, very positive.
- David Bills: That's not to say that these other things don't happen. I mean, more advantaged parents can do things that less advantaged parents can't do. But again, if you think of the counter-factual area, what if schools didn't exist? I think we would be a much poorer country than we are.
- Joan Kjaer: Well, and also, I think, if we think back to the post-World War II period, and the GI Bill, and all the young men were able to go to college, and some women, too. And it changed the last 50 years of the 20th century, I think. So, as you think about addressing the students that are here today, what are your ... as a professor, as a teacher, as an associate dean, do you talk about how education can and does provide social mobility, opportunities for social transformation, in multiple directions. Obviously, social transformation can go, and it doesn't take a straight route all the time. But is this one of the things that you talk about within the College of Education, to your young students?
- Amanda Thein: Absolutely, and in fact, Mimi Young, who's going to be part of another conversation, has brought some of her students here from a course that we teach called Schooling in the US, and that's one thing that we talk about. That's a class on teaching and learning that's a required course for our students. So, we certainly broach those issues in that class.
- Amanda Thein: I think another thing that's important for our students out here to know about is, in thinking about being part of a public institution and a state institution, in a flagship state institution like we are, it's really important to think about how the university is serving the state of Iowa, in terms of research that matters to our community, as well as research that matters more broadly in our research communities nationally, internationally. I think we have an obligation to do research that matters, and that actually, that we're in conversation with community members around the state about the work that we do, and we're listening to people across the state about what they need and what problems are facing Iowans.
- Amanda Thein: So, I think that's one of our obligations, and I think when we talk about state funding, I sometimes think that that's one way we can work on helping people understand the value of education, is to show people across the state how the

work that we do and the research that we do, that sometimes seems to be pie in the sky, or esoteric, or what have you, actually does matter in material ways in the everyday lives of people in the state.

Joan Kjaer: And were you going to say something, David?

Amanda Thein: No.

Joan Kjaer: Regarding the urban-rural school situation, the contrast, perhaps, in Iowa, are some of the smaller communities ... I know, when I was growing up, there was a consolidated school district somewhere, where they had previously had a number of little towns, all had their own very small school, and then they joined together for a consolidated, larger school. Is this happening in some of the parts of the state where population is really, clearly diminishing? Or what are we seeing in the rural areas?

David Bills: I think that that's definitely an issue, and I think economically, you understand why it's happening. It's very difficult to maintain two small schools in a very sparsely populated area. But you know this too, if you go through these small towns, the center of social life in those communities is the school, and people who don't have kids in their own schools, they still go to football games. Some of them still go to events. It's sort of how life in that community is organized. And you lose a lot, because ... You understand the economic argument for school consolidation, but there's definitely a social cost to that, a community cost, it seems to me.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. And I should also ask something about the people who do homeschooling these days. Is that a growing proportion of parents who school their own kids? I don't really know how many people here in Iowa, for example, do that.

David Bills: It's substantial in Iowa. They've had their own state-level organization for years. I think the mistake is thinking about homeschooling as this homogenous group of people. It's really a number of groups of people. You've got very religious-oriented people who believe in it. You've got a lot of, I don't know how to characterize them, sort of '60s hippies. I still sort of fit into that. There's a fairly substantial group of what you might characterize as survivalist people in Iowa, who have just chosen to bring their kids out of public school.

David Bills: And I think, for most, I understand, most homeschooling, too, the kids still have some relationship with public school. I mean, it's not entirely separated. But, yeah, it seems to be anything that gets in the way of thinking of the school as public is dangerous. And I understand parents' right to do that, parents' choice to do that, but I think anything that breaks down that sense of commonality is, there are very serious costs to that, I guess.

Joan Kjaer: Anything further you'd like to say, Amanda, on that?

Amanda Thein:

I think David's covered that pretty well. I mean, I think that, I agree that an important thing to think about with homeschool is that it is a diverse group of families who choose that, and that students have a lot of opportunities to be involved in their communities, and even in their schools, through other ways. Through athletics and extracurricular activities. But I think that this is a group that's more organized than they have been in the past.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah, I didn't know that. Thank you both for starting us off on this discussion. David Bills and Amanda Thein, thank you, and we'll go to our next segment in just a moment, but for now, would you please thank our guests?