

Renovating *The Schoolhome*

Helen Anderson

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Though seemingly contradictory at first glance, Jane R. Martin's argument for a school that embodies the qualities of home and Cris Mayo's call for educational practices that invite discomfort may appear more complementary to each other on closer inspection. While Martin's book *The Schoolhome*¹ focuses primarily on students who come from uncomfortable environments to begin with, it seems to allow for expansion in order to address Mayo's concerns about teaching students in positions of social privilege. What I will be arguing in this paper is that, despite their apparent differences, the educational theories of Martin and Mayo might be read to hold a certain compatibility. I would therefore like to examine what sort of theory might be created if the two are combined, and look at whether or not this hybrid theory provides a more adequate approach to anti-oppression education.

I would first like to provide for my readers a brief account of Martin's and Mayo's work, while exploring some of the limitations of each theory. I would then like to discuss how some of these limitations might be overcome through a re-reading of Martin's and Mayo's work as compatible. Although Mayo criticizes notions of education that center on making students feel at home, I argue that Martin's vision of the Schoolhome allows, if not calls for, students to experience the discomfort of stunned confusion at the recognition of "their own socially acceptable ignorance."² If Martin's work can be read in this way, then perhaps her theory of education can be seen to address systemic oppression more adequately than Mayo might think. Though I do not want to suggest that Martin's theory of education as laid out in *The Schoolhome* is without limitations, I do think that, by taking Mayo's theory and criticisms into account, the Schoolhome can perhaps be renovated to better meet the needs of all students, not just the young and marginalized.

Like Maria Montessori's *Casa dei Bambini* (Home of Children) founded in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century, Jane R. Martin's idea of the Schoolhome was initially motivated by a concern for the many children who are left alone everyday as their caregiver(s) go off to work; children who often experience or are witnesses to neglect, poverty, abuse, violence, and other forms of harm. What is needed to overcome the problems that these children face at home and in their communities, argues Martin, is the creation of a school that focuses on the domestic values of an ideal home, a school that can teach children the importance of learning to live together and respect each other. Underlying Martin's vision of the Schoolhome is a commitment to "the three Cs of care, concern, and connection," a remnant of Montessori's *Casa dei Bambini* (SH, 134). Yet, Martin recognizes that, unlike the homogeneity of Montessori's students, contemporary American families and classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, which leaves Martin asking the question, "How can we create a moral equivalent of home in which children of all races, classes, and cultures feel at home?" (SH, 43).

The answer, for Martin, lies in creating an experimental learning space in which all students feel loved as well as feel a sense of responsibility to themselves, to each other, and to their physical surroundings. What this requires is the establishment of an affectionate climate in the classroom, one that “cannot countenance violence, be it corporal punishment or teacher’s sarcasm, the bullying of one child by others in the terrorization of an entire class, the use of hostile language about whole races or the denigration of one sex...” (*SH*, 38). By establishing a learning environment in which children can feel comfortable and “at home,” in the sense that they can feel included as a valuable member of the class, Martin hopes not only to reduce some of the harms the children in her Schoolhome have experienced, but also to teach students how to live well in this world. As I understand it, Martin envisions living well as thinking about how one can take action to change society, in addition to thinking about how one’s own actions may affect others now and in the future. Rather than preparing children for the harsh realities of “the real world,” Martin sees the Schoolhome as a way to prepare children to create a better world.

In addition to fostering “the three Cs” of caring, concern, and connection, another central role of the Schoolhome is to challenge a societal repression of domesticity. This move is necessary, argues Martin, in order to take the notion of home and family beyond the private into the public sphere, thereby changing the ways in which people relate to each other. According to Martin, American society represses the values of domesticity for a number of reasons. Borrowing from Freud, Martin asserts that, “The process of repression is not one over which a person has control. When we repress some unbearable idea — and it is the unbearable ones that get repressed — we do not know we do so” (*SH*, 122). What, then, is so horrible about the domestic sphere that it requires repression?

According to Martin, the primary reason that domesticity has been pushed into the recesses of American consciousness is because it has traditionally been associated with women and with softness. In a patriarchal society that sees masculine qualities as superior and directly opposed to feminine qualities, Americans have generally been quick to reject what is deemed the private or female sphere. Furthermore, Martin asserts that care, concern, and connection are often left out of class curriculum because teachers assume that students develop these qualities naturally at home, although this is often not the case (*SH*, 136). Such an exclusion of the three Cs also results from a perceived separation of the public/civic realm from the domestic, and it is this public realm that education is expected to prepare students for entering.

Martin is therefore led to ask:

Has school no choice but to dissociate itself from home? As those students of mine who challenge their classmates to think about changing the “real” world intuitively know, there is another option. We can remap the public world. Instead of renouncing the Schoolhome because its values, attitudes, and patterns of behavior conflict with those [of the public sphere], we can try to make the values, attitudes and patterns of behavior that belong to the public world conform to those of the Schoolhome. (*SH*, 162)

And this is exactly what Martin hopes to do: she hopes to think of the public realm *as* the domestic realm. What this means is that Martin wants students to begin

to think of the public good as directly related to their own well-being, and to think of themselves and the other citizens of their nation as kin. Martin views the problems of American society as everyone's problems. Part of the solution to these problems, she asserts, is the creation of a Schoolhome, a school that teaches children the values of domesticity. By learning to think about themselves in connection to the rest of the world, as part of a large family that extends far beyond the boundaries of the home, children will learn to appreciate and take up domestic values such as love, respect, concern, and responsibility.

But is the creation of a school that is the moral equivalent of home an adequate method for addressing the inequality and systemic oppression in society? Cris Mayo apparently thinks not. In her article "Relations Are Difficult," Mayo criticizes theories of education that seek to make students feel at home in the classroom. She argues that such theories do not ask students in dominant social groups to examine the positions of privilege and power they hold, thereby failing to truly question unequal power relations in society. Mayo asserts that, rather than making students feel comfortable in class, education should allow for students to experience the tensions that arise in open discussions of power and privilege. She argues that thinking about school as a comfortable home is unhelpful, because

This domestic relation impedes our obligation to push students (and ourselves) out into the responsibility of relations with others in ways that are unlikely to lead to domestic and cozy comfort. I do not mean this as a fully heartless response to dynamics of power, subjectivity, and responsibility, but I want to account for the central role the inequalities of the world have in maintaining home as a place apart and a place of studied ignorance.³

Mayo is here concerned that, in attempting to establish a school environment that is comfortable for all students, certain inequalities may be overlooked. This criticism is made clearer in her article "Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race, and the Lure of Beautiful Manners."⁴ In this article, Mayo outlines some of the problems with attempting to maintain civility in discussions of oppression. To begin, she points out that civility can be seen as central to discrimination in that it may lead privileged groups to assume that all is well, in addition to creating the illusion that there are no differences between groups. Mayo then goes on to argue that stressing a need to maintain civility in discussions of power dictates what can and cannot be said. Complaining is seen as inappropriate, or uncivil, and therefore should not be a part of polite discussion. However, this may force marginalized groups to remain silent in naming the oppression they experience.⁵ Furthermore, as Mayo asserts, "civility acts like a gift that expects reciprocation that essentially puts the recipient into an uncomfortable form of debt."⁶ That is, civility can also entail obligation on the part of the oppressed, in that it suggests a mutual willingness to share or to forge some sort of relationship across social locations, while a lack of such willingness may be perceived as uncivil or ungrateful.

Apparent in both articles by Mayo is the need she perceives for discomfort in discussions about privilege and power. She states that:

Incivility as I conceive of it is not a blatant disregard for the feelings of people, but rather a way to remind all in an encounter that there is a historical and political background that structures their perceptions and interactions. I am not making a claim that we should turn to

discomfort for discomfort's sake but rather that in approaching questions of bias, diversity, and difference through the manufacture of "safe spaces," we may neglect examining for whom those spaces are safe and why.⁷

Mayo is clearly making the case here that focusing on the creation of "safe" and comfortable educational spaces, as Jane R. Martin does in *The Schoolhome*, may only serve to perpetuate existing social inequalities.

However, it seems to me that in her criticism of *The Schoolhome*, Mayo is often talking past Martin, rather than to her. While Martin seems to be primarily concerned with the plight of young children uncomfortable in society to begin with, Mayo seems to focus primarily on educating adults or older children holding positions of privilege and power. For example, Mayo suggests that an "antidote" to theories that place "home" and "safety" at the center of anti-oppression education is to "stun [students] with their own socially acceptable ignorance."⁸ Mayo derives this notion of stunning or *aporia* from Socrates, who believed that learning often required a process of unsettling; that is, shocking students with the realization that things may not be as they first appear. What is significant about the notion of *aporia* in the context of Mayo's discussion of anti-bias education is that it makes students in positions of privilege aware that there may be different ways of looking at oppression and power relations that they have not yet considered. Stunned confusion may cause socially privileged students to recognize that the positions of power they hold have blinded them to their own roles in systems of oppression.

Yet, I am then left asking: How might Mayo address the issue of educating students that are already traumatized by systemic oppression? What I wonder is whether or not Mayo thinks it would be of any use to further attempt to stun a child by her/his own ignorance if the child is already traumatized. A stingray or jellyfish may not cause much damage to a healthy adult, but when a child struggling to survive is attacked, the "stunning" effects of such an attack might be much more serious. For example, while a classroom discussion of sexism and violence against women may be uncomfortable yet illuminating for male students, it may be very traumatizing for a female sexual assault survivor. The question then becomes, who is benefiting from these discussions, and at whose expense?

Additionally, is the recognition of one's own oppression always a positive educational outcome? Or, may it only serve to exacerbate feelings of marginalization and powerlessness in some students already harmed by systemic social injustice? For example, in a discussion on using confrontation and trauma as a pedagogical tool, Anne Berlak remarks that, in one of her classes, through the use of classroom confrontation, the only black student came to "see himself as a black man who, in the words of [James] Baldwin, had been 'assured by his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization.' ... He came to recognize that many of his classmates did not, in fact, hear him when he spoke."⁹ While Berlak's student felt that such an awakening was an important experience for him, it may be very difficult or painful for other students to acknowledge the extent of systemic injustice in their lives, potentially leading to the repression of such knowledge. Although being stunned by one's own ignorance may be uncomfortable and difficult for students in

dominant social positions, it seems that, in confrontational discussions about social injustice, there can often be more personal risk involved for the students already marginalized by oppression, raising questions again about the use of trauma or stunning as a pedagogical tool.

Furthermore, I wonder whether or not the use of *aporia* would really be able to persuade students in positions of privilege to abandon their fundamental beliefs. Would there be no resistance to this difficult new knowledge?¹⁰ I think it is important here to once again return to the work of Jane R. Martin, in order to attempt to develop a fuller theory of education that addresses the needs of both students who perceive themselves as having very little power and privilege and students who have a great deal of power and privilege, but choose not to perceive it. Despite the seemingly insurmountable differences between the theories of Martin and Mayo, I think that, when read as complementary to each other, they can be used to address many of the deficiencies in each theory. So, how are we to join the two theories together, in a way that creates a comfortable space for embracing the three Cs, but also causes students to examine their own assumptions about social inequality and power? I think this will require a re-examination of some of the criticisms of Martin and a re-reading of *The Schoolhome*, one that allows for discomfort in the classroom while continuing to allow students to feel welcome and at home. Although Mayo charges that Martin's work, in its search to create a comfortable, home-like environment for children at school, fails to allow for power and privilege to be questioned in the classroom, I would like to argue that this need not necessarily be the case. Rather, Martin's *Schoolhome* seems to allow, if not call for, a questioning of social inequality and the privileges enjoyed by socially dominant groups.

To begin with, in *The Schoolhome*, Martin states that disagreement and contestation do not necessarily conflict with the values of the *Schoolhome*, nor should discomfort be avoided for the sake of peace. Anticipating some of the criticisms raised by Mayo, Martin writes:

One wonders if the connections woven by love and the three Cs are not so tenuous that differences of opinion are liable to damage them. To prevent feelings from being hurt and to preserve the peace, does not criticism have to be suppressed? Can controversial issues even be confronted by a people who see their nation as home and themselves as kin?...*Disagreement does not conflict with domestic tranquility*. Bullying and violence do. If we do not start seeing ourselves as kin and acting as such, how can we ever arrive at adequate solutions to the problems besetting our culture? (*SH*, 192, italics added)

Here, Martin seems to be suggesting that there is still room for argument within *The Schoolhome*, just as there is within many caring families. Martin's notions of caring and concern do not necessarily require constant comfort it seems, and may even require discomfort at times. If caring as an educator means helping students learn, and insistence on civility and comfort in the classroom can inhibit learning as Mayo argues, would it therefore not be the case that caring as an educator may entail creating or allowing for moments of discomfort in class?

Further, although Mayo argues that tension and discomfort are more important in anti-oppression education than creating a place in which students feel at home, I

think that without the care, concern, and connection with others that Martin hopes to develop in her *Schoolhome*, students holding dominant positions in society may feel little motivation to challenge social inequality. If students do not feel a sense of kinship with their classmates or other members of society, they may be reluctant to question or give up the privileges they enjoy. I do not want to suggest — nor does Martin, I think — that relations within the classroom must always be polite and civil. Instead, I only want to point out that some sense of connection across social locations may need to be established if privileged students are going to make a commitment to challenging systemic oppression. Stunning students by their ignorance will only be effective if they perceive there is something more at stake than merely the ability to say they are right.

As Mayo calls for a realization of one's ignorance in her theory of anti-bias education, Martin seems to be calling for American citizens to be stunned by their repression of the domestic. Freud's notion of repression seems to feature prominently in the work of both Mayo and Martin in similar ways, suggesting that, despite Mayo's wariness and skepticism about the merits of *The Schoolhome*, Martin may also be arguing for a need to unsettle the minds of individuals. I think it can also be argued that Martin's vision of the *Schoolhome* can allow for teaching students to recognize their roles in systemic oppression, as well as teaching them to think about the positions of power they hold in relation to others. This seems apparent where Martin states that:

Under a reread domestic tranquility clause the poor would not be my poor or your poor. They would be *our family's* poor and as such America could not ignore them. The children with nowhere to go... would be part of *our larger family* and provisions would therefore have to be made for them. The violence in the schools, playgrounds, the streets would not be my doing. It would be the doing of some of *our kinfolk* and untold others of them would be harmed by it. Thus, the problem would have to be placed at the top of our public agenda....
(*SH*, 178)

It appears that, in this passage, Martin is asking individuals to take responsibility for the larger problems of society that might not directly affect their own lives, in addition to asking them to take responsibility for the problems caused by members of the groups to which they belong. Despite the criticisms that Mayo might raise against Martin, I think that Martin's book *The Schoolhome* can be expanded to address many of Mayo's concerns.

However, even after a re-reading of *The Schoolhome* that allows for conflict and examinations of power in the classroom, I am still left with some lingering questions about Martin's theory of education. In her book, Martin likens the students in a classroom, and later the citizens of a nation, to the members of a family. And just as all loving family relationships require a degree of trust, so must the students in Martin's classroom and the citizens in Martin's nation learn to trust each other. While this may seem unproblematic at first, my concern is that some members of this family might be required to be more trusting than others. That is, I fear that individuals who have already been harmed by unequal power relations will be the given the biggest burden, being asked to rely on members of socially-privileged groups that have harmed them in the past. Like Mayo's concerns about how civility

operates across differences in society, I am worried about how trust might be expected to operate within Martin's idea of the schoolfamily and the nationfamily. If members of socially dominant groups are willing to trust members of subordinated groups, perhaps a reciprocal sense of trust will be expected. And, if so, will individuals traumatized by oppression, who may find it difficult to trust, be seen as ungrateful or suspicious, even if it is clear that certain others should not be trusted?

Furthermore, I am led to wonder how Martin's notions of care, concern, and connectedness might address conflicting ideas, such as if one individual's notion of "caring" is perceived by another as causing harm. I wonder if Martin's domestic curriculum would enable students to address such a conflict, and if not, what might be the implications of this for Martin's theory. I am also concerned that Martin's notion of the Schoolhome might be partly premised upon a need or assumed ability to get to know others, although this seems like something that can be very problematic to attempt. As I have discussed earlier, attempts by members of privileged groups to understand what life is like for members of marginalized groups can place an unfair expectation of reciprocal civility on the latter, while also relying on the members of marginalized groups to inform others about what it is like to be in their position. If Martin does rely on the idea that one can get to know what it is like to be part of another social group, what might be the consequences of this for her theory?

Additionally, does Martin even think about social groups in the same way that Mayo does? By this I mean that it seems Martin is primarily focused on relationships between individuals, whereas Mayo seems concerned with relations between individuals as embedded within social groups. For Mayo, to challenge oppression on a systemic, institutional level requires that relations between individuals take into account the larger social relations of the groups to which these individuals belong. Whereas for Martin, it could be that her Schoolhome assumes the possibility of socially-neutral individuals who can or should put aside social difference for the sake of learning the "three Cs" of care, connection, and concern. Yet Mayo would want to assert that such a socially-neutral position is impossible to attain, and dangerous to attempt. I am then led to ask: might Martin's conception of the individual prevent her from being able to adequately challenge the *systemic, institutionalized* nature of oppression?

Given the limitations of Martin's theory and the questions about Mayo's work that remain to be explored further, I think it is important to be able to read the work of Martin and Mayo as complementary to rather than exclusive of each other. Although Martin may not have intended for *The Schoolhome* to be read as compatible with the work of Mayo, it appears that a complementary reading of the two theories can be used to strengthen the argument of each author. While Martin seems to focus primarily on the needs of young children already uncomfortable in society, Mayo turns her attention primarily to the education of older students in positions of social privilege. It seems that, in isolation, neither theory is able to adequately address the needs of all students; yet, when read off each other, Martin and Mayo offer a broader picture of the educational landscape that can help address

some of the short-comings of each theory. In the future, however, it might be helpful to look at a more detailed account of the use of stunning or trauma as a pedagogical tool, as well as an examination of how this relates to students' understandings of their own agency. I think this would allow us to gain a better understanding of the merits and potential problems in the work of Jane R. Martin and Cris Mayo, while also shedding more light on the debate over comforting versus discomforting anti-oppression education.

-
1. Jane R. Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). This work will be cited as *SH* in the text for all subsequent references.
 2. Cris Mayo, "Relations Are Difficult," in *No Education Without Relation*, eds. Charles Bingham and Alexander M. Sidorkin (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 124.
 3. *Ibid.*, 122.
 4. Cris Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race, and the Lure of Beautiful Manners," in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 78–87.
 5. *Ibid.*, 79–80.
 6. *Ibid.*, 82.
 7. *Ibid.*, 85.
 8. Mayo, "Relations Are Difficult," 124.
 9. Anne Berlak, "Confrontation and Pedagogy: Cultural Secrets, Trauma, and Emotion in Antioppressive Pedagogies," in *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*, ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 131.
 10. For a further discussion of these last two questions, see Daniel Pekarsky, "Socratic Teaching: a Critical Assessment," *Journal of Moral Education* 23, no. 2 (1994): 119–134.