

## *Perspectives and Imperatives*

### THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONDITIONS FOR DEMOCRACY

LANDON E. BEYER, *Knox College*

One of the difficulties in deciding whether or to what extent our educational institutions and practices are furthering the cause of democracy is the multiplicity of ideas, values, and actions that various groups and individuals claim are democratic. Competing perspectives are often inconsistent or even contradictory, so that by articulating and promoting one vision we implicitly deny the legitimacy of others. Also, the terms *democracy*, *democratic practices*, *democratic reforms*, and *democratic resolutions* are often presented as if they have clear, unambiguous, straightforward meanings, especially when they are used to attract our sympathies to some cause or other. In putting forward some vision of democracy, interest groups project a conception of democracy that furthers their purposes. President Reagan's repeated references to the *contras* in Nicaragua as forces committed to a "democratic resolution" of the conflict there offer only one among several contemporary examples of how language is used for affiliative purposes.

Therefore, we must be clear about what view of democracy we promote as we try to understand the conditions required for its existence. My own view of democracy diverges in important respects from more conventional ones. We often refer to political and civic affairs in the public domain as bounded by democratic principles and ideas. Political events—elections, the workings of government, and some notion of civic pride and participation—are clearly central in discussions of what constitutes democracy in the public realm. These matters are important components of democracy; they indicate something of who we are as a people and a society, what we stand for, what purposes and whose interests we support, and what values permeate public decision making. Yet my own view is that democracy is much more expansive than this public, civic realm. It must pertain more broadly to a way of life, a cultural form that goes beyond political participation and public forms of disclosure and civic responsibility. I agree with Dewey's view that "a democracy is more than a form of government, it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."<sup>1</sup> Democratic forms of life must

---

<sup>1</sup>John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), p. 87.

encompass political participation even as such participation is made more democratic than is now the case; must transcend the contours of public discourse even as these are made more responsive to the rights and needs of persons rather than accentuating property rights.<sup>2</sup> As a cultural form, democracy must include the integration of the public and the private, the official and the familial, as we seek to enlarge the scope of participatory activities within a variety of institutional and personal settings.

Central to this vision of a culture of democracy is choice. Many decisions must be made as a normal part of social and institutional life, just as a matter of living and having experiences. These decisions operate at various levels and have both short- and long-range consequences: from how much if any money to spend on "Star Wars" research, development, and deployment as compared with support for the homeless, the hungry, and the unemployed; to how best to structure our work and personal lives; to the sort of future that we should provide our children. In a democracy, these questions must be able to be made—and reinterpreted, debated, reformulated, and acted on—not by a small elite who presume to speak for the rest of us, but by the people ourselves, all of us, as we widen the circle of participation in social life.<sup>3</sup> This view of democracy as a cultural form, a way of life that goes beyond civic affairs, has far-reaching social and educational implications.

#### THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS FOR DEMOCRACY

One of the basic prerequisites for a culture of democracy is the existence of social groups within which cultural characteristics can be identified and valued. A culture cannot exist solely within the boundaries provided by isolated individuals—even if they live nearby and in large numbers—if they do not have a commitment to shared experience and opportunities to enlarge and extend that experience. Democracy, then, can exist only within genuine communities. This requirement creates several difficulties because contemporary American society, dominated by a focus on individualism, has lost a sense of community.<sup>4</sup> As Bellah and his collaborators say in *Habits of the Heart*.

The American understanding of the autonomy of the self places the burden of one's own deepest self-definitions on one's individual choice. . . . The notion that one discovers one's deepest beliefs in, and through, tradition and community is not very congenial to Americans. Most of us imagine an autonomous self existing independently, entirely outside any tradition and community, and then perhaps choosing one.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self. Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: Norton, 1984), Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

<sup>5</sup>Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 65.

The existence of communities is problematic largely because we have inherited classical liberal views of human life, we often perceive choices to exist outside of any important social context.<sup>6</sup>

Seeing the importance of communities also requires a historical consciousness of the sort that we have largely abandoned. This absence goes beyond an ignorance of the past. It includes a loss of a synoptic vision. We have insulated ourselves from both past events and future possibilities, becoming sealed in a perpetual present—living “one day at a time,” partly no doubt out of fear that tomorrow may not come. Rekindling a commitment to democracy requires rebuilding a historical consciousness in which past and future are inextricably connected to who we are now and what we might yet become.

These connections are not possible, however, when material, intellectual, personal, and familial resources are allotted as unequally as they are in U.S. society. A loss of historical consciousness and a lack of communal identity are abstractions too distant to mourn by people who are homeless, without sufficient food and clothing, and otherwise oppressed by the inequalities of American life. The denial or restriction of access of such resources for people of color, other minority groups, women, and the working poor makes democratic life impossible for all of us.

The distribution of wealth in the United States has become less, not more, equal recently. Comparing the years 1985 and 1981, for example, a rich family enjoyed a 30 percent gain in its standard of living, a poor family was 5 percent less well off than before.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, during the last three decades, the gap between the bottom 20 percent of U.S. families and the top 5 percent has nearly doubled.<sup>8</sup> Consider the situation facing poor and minority children in this country. Overall, 1 in 5 children live in poverty, for Hispanic children, the figure is 2 in 5; for black children, the figure is an astonishing 1 in 2. Since 1979, 3.1 million children have fallen into poverty (an average of 125 per hour).<sup>9</sup> As a result of federal budget cuts and an inability to buy health insurance, “the gap between the survival rates of black and white babies is growing.”<sup>10</sup> If democracy is to be a live possibility, a commitment to equality must be a central feature of public policy.

This commitment to equality has implications for economic and social, as well as political, life. Democratic forms of life that promote widespread, egalitarian decision making based on a model of full participation (that does

<sup>6</sup>Landon E. Beyer, ‘Can Schools Further Democratic Practices?’ *Theory Into Practice* (in press)

<sup>7</sup>Martin Carnoy, Derek Shearer, and Russell Rumberger, *A New Social Contract: The Economy and Government After Reagan* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983)

<sup>8</sup>Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *On Democracy: Toward a Transformation of American Society* (New York: Penguin, 1983)

<sup>9</sup>Children’s Defense Fund, *American Children in Poverty* (Washington, DC: Children’s Defense Fund, 1984)

<sup>10</sup>Associated Press, ‘Black Infants Die at Twice the Rate of White Infants,’ *Galesburg Register-Mail*, 5 January 1984

not include a differential in power among participants<sup>11</sup>) are incompatible with current forms of economic organization. A corporate capitalist economy emphasizes not the process of democratic decision making for producing and distributing goods and services but the efficient and divisive isolation of people, not cooperative arrangements but a separation of conception from execution, not personally fulfilling but stultifying, alienating, demeaning work, not the equitable distribution of products but the stimulation of artificial markets and "needs" that expand an industry's profits and sphere of influence. These tendencies are inimical to the vision of democracy sketched here, we must restructure our economic institutions and practices.<sup>12</sup>

Democracy requires that we develop the ability to think critically about the way things are and how they could be different, that we reflect on our circumstances and on our processes of reflection. This way of thinking involves, as Bunch has said, "an active, not a passive, relationship to the world. It requires confidence that your thoughts are worth pursuing and that you can make a difference. And it demands looking beyond how to make do and into how to make 'making do' different—how to change the structures that control our lives."<sup>13</sup> This worldview has both a psychological and a social dimension. Part of the reality of social relations has been the existence of patriarchal, hierarchical, and other divisive patterns of interaction and meaning that result in a structured silence for women and others. Such silences prevent participation and destroy communal identities that are essential for democracy as a way of life. People with privileged positions in current structures and patterns of communication have an obligation to create spaces for those previously silenced to be heard and valued.

For democracy to become a cultural form, we must carry out several ideas and actions:

- expand the parameters of decision making, since choice is a fundamental fact of social and institutional life
- re-establish communities where culture, conversation, and decision making can become realities
- cultivate historical consciousness so that we can link our current predicaments to what preceded us and reconstruct our problems to promote what might yet be
- commit to a more equitable distribution of resources, as well as a democratization of daily, economic life, to promote full participation

---

<sup>11</sup>Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>12</sup>Andrew Levine, *Arguing for Socialism* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

<sup>13</sup>Charlotte Bunch, "Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education," in *Learning Our Way: Essays in Feminist Education*, ed. Charlotte Bunch and Sandra Pollack (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983), p. 256.

● create what Williams has called "structures of feeling" within which those who have been silenced and subdued may be heard and respected<sup>14</sup>

These ideas have several implications for education.

### SCHOOLING FOR DEMOCRACY

School practices have not always and uniformly followed the social ideas and values required for building a culture of democracy. Indeed, there is evidence of some constancy for almost a century in school practices that are inconsistent with democratic ideas. For example, Cuban's study of American classrooms concludes that "the data show striking convergence in outlining a stable core of teacher-centered instructional activities in the elementary school and, in high school classrooms, a remarkably pure and durable version of the same set of activities."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in the curriculum field, Kliebard argues that, regarding the importance placed on developing approaches to curriculum planning, "about all we have done on the question of the role of objectives in curriculum development since Bobbitt's day is, through some verbal flim-flam, convert Bobbitt's 'ability to' into what are called behavioral or operational terms and to enshrine the whole process into what is known as the 'Tyler rationale.'"<sup>16</sup>

Goodlad's "Study of Schooling" provides little cause for optimism, given the desire to promote more democratic forms of classroom life.<sup>17</sup> In summarizing the data from more than 1,000 classrooms in elementary and secondary schools, Sirotnik describes what these researchers call the modal classroom:

... a lot of teacher talk and a lot of student listening, unless students are responding to teachers' questions or working on written assignments, almost invariably closed and factual questions, little corrective feedback and no guidance, and predominantly total class instructional configurations around traditional activities—all in a virtually affectless environment. It is but a short inferential leap to suggest that we are implicitly teaching dependence upon authority, linear thinking, social apathy, passive involvement, and hands-off learning.<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis on passivity, apathy, joylessness, and dependence on authority is the antithesis of what is required to establish a culture of democracy through schooling.

<sup>14</sup>Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), especially Part One, Chapter 2, "The Analysis of Culture"

<sup>15</sup>Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1980* (New York: Longman, 1984), p. 238

<sup>16</sup>Herbert M. Kliebard, "Persistent Curriculum Issues in Historical Perspective," in *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*, ed. William Pinar (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1975), p. 45

<sup>17</sup>John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>18</sup>Kenneth A. Sirotnik, "What You See Is What You Get: Consistency, Persistency, and Mediocrity in the Classroom," *Harvard Educational Review* 53 (February 1983): 29

It is easy to blame teachers for the constancy in schools and for the continued tendencies toward not enacting the values of democracy. Several reform proposals have centered on the role of teachers in changing educational practice.<sup>19</sup> But focusing on alleged teacher inadequacies—using test-score comparisons to cajole and intimidate teachers, as former Secretary of Education William Bennett has repeatedly done—misses larger dynamics that are responsible for the anti-democratic practices tending to dominate in our schools. Further, these efforts to focus on inadequate teaching overlook the historical attempts to create alternative democratic practices that parallel the “business-as-usual” approaches to education, the struggles by minority groups, political activists, union organizers, and women’s groups to provide more democratic, egalitarian forms of schooling. Even the important data supplied by Cuban, Goodlad, and Sirotnik misses the crucial contributions being made by such groups as the Institute for Democracy in Education and the Boston Women’s Teachers’ Group. These continuing struggles are cause for celebration and courage in the face of political, economic, ideological, and bureaucratic forces that encourage anti-democratic practice in schools.<sup>20</sup>

The beginnings of the curriculum field as an area of study came when the forces of urbanization were causing concern about the “de-homogenization” of American enclaves, when the values and perspectives surrounding industrialization were gaining momentum.<sup>21</sup> Shaped by this context, the dominant model of curriculum making was based on a metaphor of production, with the intent of promoting a socially reproductive, partially socialized body of students and workers through systems-management procedures that would promote social and economic stability. A key to this process was the concept of predestination, of both the particular objectives of the curriculum and of the more general economic and social trajectories of students. By applying the scientific and management principles of their day, the founders of our field sought to apply industrial, inegalitarian, anti-democratic ideas and methods to curriculum theory and development.

How far have we come since the days of Taylorism, the techniques of mass production and manipulation, and the predestination of knowledge and people? We still live with an incredible amount of flim-flam. One of the current bandwagons in our field is the movement toward an “excellence” that is ill-defined but seems to include a commitment to a notion of “the basics”

---

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), The Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers* (East Lansing, MI: The Holmes Group, 1986)

<sup>20</sup>See Landon E. Beyer and Michael W. Apple, eds., *The Curriculum: Problems, Politics, and Possibilities* (Albany State University of New York Press, 1988)

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Barry M. Franklin, *Building the American Community: The School Curriculum and the Search for Social Control* (Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1986)

(whether “new” or “old”), tighter discipline, more testing (now a requirement for promotion in all the kindergarten classrooms of Georgia<sup>22</sup>), more homework, and closer ties between schools and business and the military (through “adopt-a-school” programs, for instance). This bandwagon is propelled, moreover, not slowly by a team of horses, but by the dazzling speed of laser printers and computer modems; coaxed along by amazing theories of artificial intelligence, systems management, and people-machine teams.<sup>23</sup> The technology and the ways it is often used—for extending “skill-and-drill” activities for poor and minority students while more creative, independent uses are found for already privileged students—make democratic uses problematic.

Much more could be said about the historical and contemporary forces in curriculum that have divided, classified, and sorted students to respond to social and economic “needs”, deskilling, the absence of genuine autonomy and decision-making possibilities, and the substitution of a craft orientation in favor of a technology of teaching have persisted and become intensified. The social, ideological, and economic pressures on schools have made the ability of individual teachers to work for democratic values and practices problematic. Yet many have sought, and continue to struggle, toward this goal.

We need alternative models of curriculum that go beyond the ideas of the field’s founders and more recent reinterpretations. We must align these models of curriculum with other traditions, areas of study, and values. The so-called reconceptualist movement in curriculum has been valuable here.<sup>24</sup> As these writers have explored the value and meaning of phenomenology and autobiography, critical cultural studies and neo-Marxist analyses, aesthetics and the arts, and existentialism and feminist studies, they have articulated alternative platforms for erecting an altered approach to curriculum. Although these writings have become more accepted within scholarly groups such as those represented by the Professors of Curriculum, their impact on school practice is still slight. Therefore, the next step in the (re)conceptualization of curriculum studies is to alter school practices, guided by a normative framework fostering communities, to expand teachers’ decision making and make more responsive, open-textured structures of feeling.

To stress teachers’ decision making and the idea that their thoughts are worth pursuing, we must restructure teacher-preparation programs. Dominated by a technical rubric and a commitment to external, patriarchal decision making, teacher-training programs have contributed to what Gadamer calls the adoration of the expert and the sacrifice of personal integrity and auton-

---

<sup>22</sup>Deborah L. Gold, “Georgia to Test Kindergartners for Promotion,” *Education Week* 7 (No. 23, 2 March 1988)

<sup>23</sup>Douglas D. Noble, “Education, Technology, and the Military,” in *The Curriculum: Problems, Politics, and Possibilities*, ed. Landon E. Beyer and Michael W. Apple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988)

<sup>24</sup>See, for instance, William Pinar, ed., *Contemporary Curriculum Discourses* (Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch-Scarbrick, 1988)

omy.<sup>25</sup> Instead, teacher preparation must be seen and practiced as the articulation of a moral, political, and personal *praxis* that fuses reflection, inquiry, and engaged practice. We cannot reasonably expect teachers to act ethically and democratically if their professional preparation has been dominated by models of teaching and learning that are passive, hierarchical, and themselves deskilled.

Even our best efforts at articulating alternative approaches to curriculum theory and practice and preparing teachers will be of little value if we think the teacher's workplace can be left to "fend for itself," as academics have often implied. We must have a vision of more democratic workplaces for teachers—where autonomy, decision making, and collaboration can be pictured—and specific strategies for bridging the often wide gulf between the vision and the current realities of schooling and teaching. We have much to learn from teachers and others as we sharpen or modify our ideas and approaches. We must particularly resist the current movement to further stratify the teaching profession—into lead teachers, professional teachers, and instructors, for example<sup>26</sup>—as anti-democratic, personally demeaning, and pedagogically counterproductive.

How we value teaching and curriculum development must also be expanded. In these times of fiscal uncertainty, parents, other taxpayers, administrators, and public officials tend to focus on test scores for evaluating teaching and curriculum. This intellectual and practical mistake overlooks the critiques of positivist science, quantitative and statistical shortcomings, and other ways of valuing school activities.<sup>27</sup> The values that can be placed on classroom life—including the aesthetic, ethical, political, and interpersonal, as well as the technical<sup>28</sup>—can broaden the scope of our evaluations, promoting greater collaboration and flexibility for teachers and more joy for students.

In a 1973 address to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Huebner began with these provocative questions.

Fellow educators—are we not lost? Do we know where we are, remember where we have been, or foresee where we are going? We've talked about education for individuals since Rousseau, Kilpatrick, and Harold Benjamin. In our lostness are we not jumping on bandwagons—yesterday core, group process, team teaching, today open classrooms and alternative schools—and assuming that at least these bandwagon experts know where they are? In our lostness are we not imbibing the snake oils and patent medicines—programmed individual computers, T.U., structure and disciplines, sensitivity training—hoping that we can cure our maladies? But we find that our pain has been relieved only temporarily and that we may indeed have been taken in by a

<sup>25</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Hermeneutics and Social Science,' *Philosophical and Social Criticism* 2 (February 1975): 307–316.

<sup>26</sup>The Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers* (East Lansing, MI: The Holmes Group, 1986).

<sup>27</sup>Landon E. Beyer, *Knowing and Acting: Inquiry, Ideology, and Educational Studies* (Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1988).

<sup>28</sup>Dwayne Huebner, 'Curricular Language and Classroom Meanings,' in *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*, ed. William Pinar (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1975).

new breed of pusher. In our lostness, we recite the familiar litanies of humanism and individuality, hoping that the gods of our past will recognize our goodwill, forgive us our sins of omission and commission, and restore our sight and vitality.<sup>29</sup>

In 1970, Schwab began his influential *The Practical: A Language for Curriculum* with this dismaying news: "I shall have three points. The first is this: The field of curriculum is moribund. It is unable, by its present methods and principles, to continue its work and contribute significantly to the advancement of education."<sup>30</sup> The prospects were not much brighter when, in 1976, Huebner lamented, "The curriculum field of the past one hundred years is not just moribund; for all practical purposes it is dead."<sup>31</sup> In his address the following year to the American Educational Research Association, Pinar asked about finding an heir to the field.<sup>32</sup>

We are, of course, still inclined to jump on and off bandwagons as the current round of snake-oil salespeople trade their wares, still subject to being lost in our search for what seems forever just beyond our grasp, still inclined toward the latest curricular flim flam and patent medicines. Yet the reports of the death of our field are premature. A resuscitated curriculum field, through its commitment to a culture of democracy, may yet help breathe life into educational studies, social relations, and personal involvement.

---

LANDON E. BEYER is Professor of Education, Knox College, Galesburg, IL 61401.

---

<sup>29</sup>Dwayne Huebner, "Poetry and Power. The Politics of Curricular Development," in *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*, ed. William Pinar (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1975), p. 271.

<sup>30</sup>Joseph Schwab, *The Practical: A Language for Curriculum* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>31</sup>Dwayne Huebner, "The Moribund Curriculum Field. Its Wake and Our Work," *Curriculum Inquiry* 6 (No. 2, 1976): 165.

<sup>32</sup>William Pinar, "The Reconceptualization of Curriculum Studies," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 10 (July–September 1978): 205–214.

Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.