

The Case for Public Education: A Question of Survival

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Introduction

Public education and public education teachers (particularly teachers' unions) in the US and throughout much of the world are under attack by both conservative and neoliberal policies. In this paper I draw on my doctoral research and subsequent analysis to propose a process for strengthening public education in ways that sustain democracy and democratic governance while combating neoliberal policies and corporate power.

In section 2 below, I summarize my research (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013) which suggests that democracy and democratic governance are required factors for society to address three critical threats to our survival. I go on to identify ten essential elements of democracy that exist as five pairs of polarities. I then describe how each of these ten elements has both positive and negative aspects and that successfully sustaining democracy and democratic governance requires that these polarities be managed in ways that maximize the positive aspects and minimize the negative aspects. I further explain specific neoliberal policies that are incompatible with maximizing the positive aspects of these elements.

In section 3, I show that the basic purpose of public education should be to prepare students to become responsible citizens in a democratic society. To become responsible citizens in a democratic society, students must know, understand, and be committed to the values necessary to sustain democracy and democratic

governance. Finally, you cannot effectively teach these values in schools (and school systems) that do not embrace and model these values.

However, neoliberal policies have served to both dismantle the public education system while simultaneously subverting its purpose so that it serves to reproduce knowledge that sustains neoliberal policies and corporate power rather than democratic governance. Thus, this neoliberal approach to public education increases the threats to our survival as the human species.

In section 4, I introduce the Graduation Pledge Alliance, which has worked for over 25 years to instill a sense of social and environmental responsibility among students, in contrast to the neoliberal concept of education. Started by students themselves at Humboldt State College (California) in 1987, the Graduation Pledge has spread to over 300 university and high school campuses worldwide.

In section 5, I propose a collaborative partnership between the Graduation Pledge Alliance and public teachers' unions through which students and teachers can use my research to transform public education systems to ensure that public schools and school systems both (a) model democratic governance and (b) instill in our students the knowledge of and commitment to those values required to sustain democracy and overcome the tyranny of corporate power and neoliberal policies.

In the concluding section, I review how my research and the project spelled out in section 4 can serve as a strategy to counter the neoliberal agenda. I then finish with an invitation to join us in this endeavor.

Summary of My Research

My research findings (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013) suggest that obtaining the positive aspects of the elements of democracy is essential if we are to overcome the challenges that threaten our survival. Those threats include (a) global climate change and other effects of environmental destruction (Gore, 2006), (b) the swelling individual violence and global militarization, which is exacerbated by the arms merchants of the US and the world as well as theocratic extremists of our leading religions (Bokaer, n.d.; Hennessey, 2013; Maddow, 2012), and (c) the escalating poverty and economic disparity that are devastating vast numbers of people on our planet resulting in increased joblessness, homelessness, hunger, sickness, and alienation, particularly among the world's poor (Klein, 2007).

My research was conducted using a critical theory framework. The key sources that I drew on were Bernstein (1976), Blake and Mouton (1985), Bohman, 2012, Butts (1980), Dewey (1938/1997), Eisler (1987), Ellerman (1990), Freire (1970/1997), Fromm (1941/1965), Gardell (1991), Grinde and Johansen (1991), Hall (1975), Hartmann (2002), Karasek and Theorell (1990), Kelly (2001), O'Manique (2003), Pateman (1970), Quarter (2001), Rawls, (1971/1999), Saul (1995), Schumpeter

(1943), Schwartz (1977/2002), Shapiro (1999), Somit and Peterson (1997), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), West (2004), and Young (2002).

From my research (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013) I specified a theoretical model identified as the polarities of democracy. This model consists of ten elements, each of which is essential but none of which are sufficient to achieve true democracy. I have further argued that these ten elements exist within a polarity management conceptual framework as identified by Johnson (1996). Johnson's polarity management concept states that when polarities exist, they have positive and negative aspects for both elements of the polarity and that successfully managing the polarity requires maximizing the positive aspects of each element while minimizing the negative aspects.

The polarities of democracy model that emerged from this research consists of ten essential elements of democracy that exist as five pairs of polarities: freedom-authority, justice-due process, diversity-equality, human rights-communal obligations, and participation-representation (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013). My research findings demonstrate that effectively managing these polarities requires addressing neoliberal policies that are incompatible with maximizing the positive aspects of these elements.

Consistent with the critical theory framework, I found that democracy originated out of our emerging consciousness as a concept to overcome oppression (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013). Thus, the polarities of democracy model provides a framework for opposing oppression in all cultures.

Among the neoliberal policies that have been demonstrated as incompatible with maximizing the positive aspects of the polarities of democracy are: shareholder primacy, maximization of profit, corporate personhood, free trade agreements that exclude environmental protections and worker rights, and the privatization of public sector work, particularly in relation to public education (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013; Chang, 2011; Ellerman, 1990; Hartmann, 2002; Kelly, 2001; Ransom & Baird, 2010). In section 5 of this paper I propose to address these neoliberal contradictions through a transformational education project intended to (a) advocate for the basic purpose of public education as preparing students to be responsible citizens in a democratic society, and (b) generate an increased commitment to social and environmental responsibility among public education students.

The Basic Purpose of Public Education

In 1980, Dr. R. Freeman Butts, the President of Teachers College at Columbia University, wrote a seminal work on the role of public education. Dr. Butts stated that the basic purpose of public education was to prepare students to be responsible citizens in a democratic society. He further stated that to prepare students to be responsible citizens, they needed to know, understand, and be committed to the

values necessary to sustain a democratic society. The values that Dr. Butts ascribed to his model of democracy, while placed within a different conceptual framework than the Johnson (1996) framework that I used, are almost identical to and thoroughly consistent with the elements that I include in my model (Benet, 2006).

Dr. Butts (1980) then added that you cannot teach democratic values in systems that do not model democratic values and unfortunately most of our public education systems do not model those values. As a result of that conclusion, Dr. Butts called for a transformative change within our public education systems to develop the capacity to model democratic values.

However, over 30 years later, the situation has only gotten worse. Research demonstrates how neoliberal policies have served to dismantle the public education system through such strategies as charter schools, cuts in public education funding, and attacks on teachers' unions (Education Justice, 2010; Weiner & Compton, 2008). Simultaneously, those neoliberal policies have subverted the basic purpose of public education. Instead, to the extent that neoliberal policies promote public education at all, they do so only to reproduce knowledge that sustains neoliberal policies and corporate power and produces compliant and obedient workers for an ever more ruthless corporate ruled world (Benet, 2012; Giroux, 2012a, 2012b).

Thus, one purpose of the transformative educational project proposed in this paper is to generate public support for the concepts that: (a) the basic purpose of public education is to prepare students to be responsible citizens in a democratic society, (b) to be responsible citizens, they need to know, understand, and be committed to the values necessary to sustain a democratic society; (c) you cannot teach democratic values in systems that do not model democratic values; and (d) our public education systems need to engage in transformative educational practices that enable them to model those democratic values. The polarities of democracy model (Benet, 2013) will be used as the theoretical framework to guide that aspect of the proposed transformative educational project described below. The proposed transformative educational project will be led by the Graduation Pledge Alliance.

The Graduation Pledge Alliance

Currently headquartered at Bentley University, the Graduation Pledge, which originated in 1987 at Humboldt State University in California, states: "I pledge to explore and take into account the social and environmental consequences of any job I consider and will try to improve these aspects of any organizations for which I work" (Graduation Pledge Alliance, n.d., ¶ 1). While originating on a college campus, the Graduation Pledge Alliance has grown to include chapters at both the high school and professional schools levels.

Over the years, hundreds of high school, college, and university campuses throughout the world have participated in the Graduation Pledge Alliance's annual

signing ceremonies (Graduation Pledge Alliance, n.d.). Now a project of the Bentley Alliance for Ethics and Social Responsibility, the Graduation Pledge Alliance serves as the international coordinating body for the pledge and seeks to build and support a global community of graduates committed to improving the social and environmental aspects of the world they live in.

In October of 2012, I was appointed as Executive Director for the Graduation Pledge Alliance. I am charged with (a) developing transformative educational experiences that will generate increased commitment to the pledge among students from our campus chapters, (b) developing external partnerships with individuals and organizations that can support our chapters at the individual school level, (c) creating linkages between the students pledging on individual campuses and the Graduation Pledge Alliance itself, and (d) creating ongoing opportunities for Graduation Pledge alumni to live out the pledge throughout their lives (Graduation Pledge Alliance, 2012). In addition to developing public support for public education, another purpose of the proposed Polarities of Democracy Transformative Educational Project is to meet this charge of the Graduation Pledge Alliance.

The Polarities of Democracy Transformative Educational Project

The Proposed Partners

The Polarities of Democracy Transformative Educational Project is proposed as a pilot project to be led by the Graduation Pledge Alliance. This pilot project is proposed to be carried out in partnership with the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) and the Highlander Research and Education Center (Highlander). These proposed partners were selected based on their long standing commitment to democratic governance, social justice, and transformative education.

OECTA has a long standing history of supporting democratic governance, social justice and transformative education. For over twenty years, OECTA members have engaged in two formal extracurricular transformative education projects (Casa Canadiense and the North South Awareness Project) designed to promote student and community understanding of global, environmental, social, economic, political and cultural issues (Casa Canadiense, n.d; North South Awareness Project, n.d.):

Casa Canadiense is a Toronto-based non-profit Canadian-Nicaraguan partnership that supports grassroots community development in Nicaragua and seeks to educate Canadian youth about global issues. Our major activities include developing and organizing school based Work Study Travel brigades to our partner communities in Nicaragua, the funding of grassroots community initiated development projects through our Casa Project Fund, and a dynamic Global Education Outreach program in Canada (Casa Canadiense, n.d, ¶ 1).

North South Awareness Project...The world is increasingly becoming a global community with a common future. Young adults at the threshold of making decisions and choices for their future cannot ignore their global context. Their future decisions and way of life will have an impact not only on their individual lives and home communities, but also on our global future. This program helps young people broaden their horizons and understanding of global, environmental, social, economic, political and cultural issues as well as encourage them to learn a new language and become acquainted with a new reality (North South Awareness Project, n.d., ¶ 1)

Highlander has an even more storied history. It was attended by both Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. In fact, Rosa Parks was trained in social change organizing at Highlander just 5 months before her refusal to move to the back of the bus! Founded in 1932, Highlander was a catalyst for the southern union movement in the 1930s and 1940s and the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. and it is just as active today (Highlander Research and Education Center, n.d):

Highlander serves as a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the South. We work with people fighting for justice, equality and sustainability, supporting their efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny. Through popular education, participatory research, and cultural work, we help create spaces — at Highlander and in local communities — where people gain knowledge, hope and courage, expanding their ideas of what is possible. We develop leadership and help create and support strong, democratic organizations that work for justice, equality and sustainability in their own communities and that join with others to build broad movements for social, economic and restorative environmental change. (¶ 1).

Elements of the Transformative Educational Project

OECTA Faculty Advisor Recruitment

OECTA will partner with GPA to develop a low intensity faculty advisor job description for faculty who volunteer to promote and support the Graduation Pledge of Social and Environmental Responsibility on OECTA campuses. OECTA and GPA will then work together to recruit these low intensity faculty advisors for student GPA chapters in all OECTA High Schools.

OECTA also will partner with the GPA to develop a high intensity faculty advisor model job description based on the concepts underlying Casa Canadiense and the North South Awareness Project. This level of faculty advising will be an option that the volunteer OECTA faculty advisors can adopt or modify. OECTA and GPA will

then work together to recruit these high intensity faculty advisors for student GPA chapters in OECTA High Schools that wish to adopt this high intensity model.

GPA Promotion of OECTA Models

As the GPA works to expand our network of high school chapters of GPA, we will partner with OECTCA to develop and promote an implementation toolkit for the Casa Canadiense and the North South Awareness Project. We will make the toolkit available for teachers' unions and districts that want to include or adapt this high intensity model of transformative education.

The GPA Bringing it Home, Taking it Global Element

We will work with OECTA members to develop a low intensity model of transformative education. This low intensity model will include two annual events to highlight the social and environmental thinking of individual students from our Graduation Pledge Chapters around the world. We will focus on ideas submitted by our Chapter members for two annual events, one focused on social responsibility and one focused on environmental responsibility.

For US schools, the social responsibility event will be linked to Martin Luther King Jr. Day activities. For countries other than the US the social responsibility event will be linked to a social justice advocate appropriate to the specific country. Our environmental responsibility event will be linked to Earth Day activities.

The process for our students and alumni to participate in the *Bringing it Home, Taking it Global* project will be relatively simple:

- Step one: for Martin Luther King Jr. Day or Earth Day, students will be asked to take a look at their campus or community and describe the number one social or environmental issue that they think needs to be addressed and that could be addressed by someone on that campus or in that community. Alumni will be asked the same question regarding their workplace.
- Step two: individual students will prepare a one page statement for a proposed strategy for how they could live out the pledge if they were already in the workforce. This will provide them with the experience of how to live out the pledge in the workplace, and provide them with great preparation for their post graduation efforts in their real workplaces. Alumni will prepare similar one page statements for the issues that they have identified for their actual workplaces.

The Graduation Pledge Alliance will then compile all of these proposed local strategies into a *Bringing it Home, Taking it Global* Annual Report that we will

promote through our global network. This report will provide students and alumni with great ideas on how they can live out the Graduation Pledge in their lives.

In addition, for both events the Graduation Pledge Alliance Executive Committee will select the best two proposals from each of three categories; high school students, post secondary students, and GPA alumni. The six persons selected will attend a five day leadership and organizing workshop at the Highlander. The criterion by which the proposed strategies will be judged is their potential contribution for creating a more healthy, sustainable, and just world. Also, the top five runners up in all three categories will receive prominent recognition and their proposals will be featured on our website and on our Facebook page.

The GPA Public Education Advocacy and Transformation Process

The GPA will provide either a monthly or quarterly (at OECTA's discretion) virtual conference meeting between me as the GPA Executive Director and the OECTA faculty advisors (and other OECTA members that wish to participate). This meeting will be used to provide coaching for faculty advisors on how to strengthen the low and high intensity student involvement models and link them with the GPA public education advocacy and transformation process.

As the GPA Executive Director, I will utilize this academic paper and my polarities of democracy research to develop a dissemination and advocacy plan to promote the philosophy that the role of public education should be to prepare students to be responsible citizens in a democratic society and to oppose the "blame the teacher's union" rhetoric of those who espouse public education's purpose as being solely the preparation of compliant workers for a corporate dominated world.

One element of this dissemination and advocacy plan will be structured as a two day visitation by me as the GPA Executive Director to individual OECTA schools to promote the OECTA/GPA partnership with students, faculty, and the community. Also during each two day visitation, I will consult with the local leadership and activist elements of OECTA to develop comprehensive strategies (mobilizing, organizing, advocacy, research, education, and collaboration) to generate local student, faculty, and community support for the vision of public education as preparing students for responsible citizenship in a democratic society.

A second element of this dissemination and advocacy plan will be the development and implementation of a comprehensive communications and outreach plan. For this plan the GPA will seek to partner with other teachers' unions and like minded organizations seeking to counter the neoliberal agenda.

Based on my polarities of democracy research (and a demonstration project that I conducted with the Rochester City School District in Rochester, NY) the GPA will

work with OECTA to develop a comprehensive high intensity transformational education program for school district personnel. This program will include five elements: (1) a process that ensures that a minimum of 95% of all participants become self convinced that democratic principles are the best method for achieving educational excellence, (2) a process for identifying each participants current level of conformity with those democratic principles, (3) a process for identifying the gap between the individuals' espoused belief system and their actual current level of conformity with those democratic principles, (4) a process for each participant to develop and implement a plan to close the gap between their espoused belief system and their current behavioral patterns, and (5) a process to ensure that building and district leadership are able to bring about the cultural change necessary to fully implement this democratic commitment.

Conclusion

This paper presents a transformative educational project designed to counter neoliberal policies and to promote the purpose of public education as preparing students to be responsible citizens in a democratic society. It promotes the polarities of democracy model as the theoretical framework to guide this project. It includes both low intensity and high intensity opportunities for students and alumni to develop and practice social and environmental responsibility. It sets forward a comprehensive advocacy and dissemination plan to promote the polarities of democracy as an alternative to the neoliberal agenda. Finally, it includes a proposed system wide transformational process to ensure that public education systems develop cultures that are consistent with and supportive of preparing students to be responsible citizens in a democratic society.

The GPA will lead the effort to secure both funding and additional partners for the Polarities of Democracy Transformative Educational Project. We will focus particularly on promoting the project among other teachers' unions. We welcome the participation of all those who would like to engage in this project to promote an alternative to the neoliberal agenda and we invite you to join us in this effort.

About the Author

Dr. Benet is an educator/researcher/activist who focuses on workplace and societal democracy. He has over 50 years experience in politics, peace & justice community organizing, community development, small business management, organization development, social economy entrepreneurship, and fostering collaborative community/campus partnerships. He served 28 years as an elected official in Rochester, NY. He serves as Executive Director of both the Graduation Pledge Alliance and the Rochester-Toronto Community/University Partnership Project.

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