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Speculations on Experiences in Public Education and the Health of the Nation's Democracy

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Abstract: In this paper an unusual informant is asked about the relationship between public education and democracy. Discussed also are the differences between schooling as preparation for employment vs. schooling for democratic living. The latter requires a curriculum different from that often found in America's public schools. An example of what one such curriculum might look like is provided. Also discussed is the problem of providing youth an apprenticeship in democracy, when some argue that few public schools are democratically run. Noted as well is the troubled relationship of contemporary assessment practices with, simultaneously, the desire to foster democratic values in our public schools. Also examined are the contemporary problems associated with assuring youth unfettered access to the literature and ideas of our civilization. It is a common belief that democracy cannot thrive when access to information is controlled. Finally, the many roles that community schools play in fostering democratic living are considered.

Keywords: curriculum; apprenticeship; employability; censorship; public education; democracy

Especulaciones sobre el estado de la educación pública y el estado de la democracia en Estados Unidos

Resumen: En este artículo, se consulta a un informante inusual sobre la relación entre la educación pública y la democracia. También se discuten las diferencias entre la escolarización como preparación para el empleo y la escolarización para la vida democrática. Esta última requiere un plan de estudios diferente al que a menudo se encuentra en las escuelas públicas de Estados Unidos. Se proporciona un ejemplo de cómo podría ser dicho plan de estudios; además, de abordar el problema de brindar a los jóvenes una formación en democracia, cuando algunos argumentan que pocas escuelas públicas se gestionan de manera democrática. También se señala la problemática relación de las prácticas de evaluación contemporáneas con el deseo de fomentar valores democráticos en nuestras escuelas públicas. Asimismo, se examinan los problemas contemporáneos relacionados con asegurar a los jóvenes un acceso sin restricciones a la literatura e ideas de nuestra civilización. Es una creencia común que la democracia no puede prosperar cuando se controla el acceso a la información. Por último, se consideran los numerosos roles que desempeñan las escuelas comunitarias en fomentar de la vida democrática.

Palabras clave: plan de estudios; formación; empleabilidad; censura; educación pública; democracia

Especulações sobre experiências na educação pública e a saúde da democracia nacional

Resumo: Neste artigo, um informante incomum é questionado sobre a relação entre educação pública e democracia. Também são discutidas as diferenças entre a escolarização como preparação para o emprego versus a escolarização para a vida democrática. Esta última requer um currículo diferente daquele frequentemente encontrado nas escolas públicas dos Estados Unidos. Um exemplo de como tal currículo poderia ser é fornecido. Também é discutido o problema de fornecer aos jovens um aprendizado em democracia, quando alguns argumentam que poucas escolas públicas são administradas democraticamente. Destaca-se também a relação problemática das práticas contemporâneas de avaliação com o desejo de fomentar valores democráticos em nossas escolas públicas. São examinados também os problemas contemporâneos associados à garantia de acesso irrestrito dos jovens à literatura e ideias de nossa civilização. É uma crença comum que a democracia não pode prosperar quando o acesso à informação é controlado. Finalmente, são considerados os muitos papéis desempenhados pelas escolas comunitárias no fomento à vida democrática.

Palavras-chave: currículo; aprendizagem; empregabilidade; censura; educação pública; democracia

Speculations on Experiences in Public Education and the Health of the Nation's Democracy

On February 8, 2023, I put a question to an informant I thought to be both well read and non-ideological. I asked, “What is the link between public education and democracy?” My informant responded with the following:

Public education and democracy are closely linked, as education plays a critical role in the functioning of democratic societies. In a democratic society, citizens are expected to participate in the political process, make informed decisions, and hold elected officials accountable. This requires a certain level of education and knowledge about the political process and government institutions.

Public education helps to ensure that all citizens have equal access to the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in democratic life. By providing education to all children, regardless of their social or economic background, public

education helps to level the playing field and reduces inequality. It also helps to promote a common understanding of democratic values and principles, such as freedom of speech, equality, and justice.

Furthermore, public education helps to foster critical thinking, independent thinking, and creativity, all of which are essential for a vibrant and healthy democracy. It provides opportunities for students to learn about different perspectives and to engage in respectful dialogue and debate. This helps to build a more informed and engaged citizenry, which is crucial for the functioning of a democratic society.

In conclusion, public education is an essential component of democracy, as it helps to ensure that all citizens have the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in the political process and to make informed decisions. It also helps to promote equality, foster critical thinking, and build a more informed and engaged citizenry.

My informant was the artificially intelligent ChatBot, called ChatGPT (Open AI, 2023). After digesting huge quantities of the worlds' literature about the issue I asked about, ChatGPT reported out what that literature commonly argues about schooling in the United States. My own beliefs are quite compatible with what the archives reveal about the beliefs of most Americans. In the paper to follow, I highlight a few issues about public education and schooling, and I judge ChatGPT's response to my query to be good news. That is because ChatGPT expressed, after its digestion of millions of documents about democracy and education, the kinds of beliefs that are widely shared by Americans. These are what might easily be called "mainstream beliefs," and they are remarkably consistent with the views of many scholars (cf., Berliner & Hermanns, 2021),

ChatGPT, however, seemed unable to recognize that not everyone wants the nation's schools to be public, in the many meanings of that word. It also failed to acknowledge that the ability of public schools to foster critical thinking, independent thinking, and creativity has frequently been called into question. These rather significant shortcomings occurred because programmers "feed" ChatGPT, and similar AI systems, the information to train them. These sources include digital books, news articles, scientific journals, and Wikipedia. It is likely that many unusual and negative views of public schools were less likely to be in the corpus of articles that train ChatGPT and similar machines.

Therefore, while the answer to my question was likely a synthesis of opinions from a wide variety of Americans, it should have also reflected the beliefs of large numbers of Americans who hold divergent views. For instance, many charter, voucher, and religious school supporters, and parents who home-school their children, might find much to argue about with ChatGPT's answer. Others may also disagree with the program's pat response regarding the role of schools in developing a shared understanding of democratic values and principles, arguing "whose values?" In what follows, I briefly outline my views about some common and difficult-to-solve issues involving values.

Arguments for Democratic Public Education

Learning for Employability vs. Learning for Life

Noticeably missing, though probably attributable to how I asked my question, was that ChatGPT seemed unconcerned about the economic role expected of public schools in American

society. Unmentioned was “preparation for employment,” which is what so many supporters of our nation’s public education systems want. I was quite pleased that ChatGPT ignored this issue.

I believe “job preparation” is too narrow a view of education’s role in a democracy. Such a view is not entirely irrelevant, of course. However, the “schooling for employability” argument almost always requires narrowing the curriculum to fit economic purposes. Thus, curriculum has been focused on learning how to type (50 years ago), or to code (in more recent times). Without question, learning such skills are easily defended. But with limited time for educating our youth, isn’t our nation, ultimately, better served by encouraging critical thinking about history, government, civics, political science, and social studies, in addition to or as a substitute for these employment-oriented skills?

Preparation for life in a democratic society requires a broader conception of the curriculum than job preparation. For example, a good thought experiment might be: “What would U.S. employment, wages, and entrepreneurship be like if we compromised our vision of a democratic society?” In my view, we are, indeed, compromising our vision of democracy by focusing on economic preparation. Educational policymakers seem now to have become overly concerned with these kinds of employability outcomes, possible due to the ongoing warnings by economists and government officials that we are ill-prepared to compete with rival nations. But in following this logic, political and educational leaders often ignore other educational outcomes, particularly citizenship. I argue that this is a costly mistake, and we are already experiencing the impacts of such an error, as in what appears to be less civility in our politics. And we see it also in the voting records of the nation. In 2022, for example, only 30-40% of eligible voters cast votes in some states, while in other states over 60% of eligible citizens voted (Ballotpedia, 2023). Neither statistic is heartening, and easily linked to a possible failure of America’s educational system. These data bring to mind the warning that Benjamin Franklin gave to Americans, namely, that he and the founding fathers created a republic—but only if we can keep it! (McHenry, 1787).

Curriculum Choice and Democratic Living

I hold that schooling in a democratic society should foster youth’s freedom of choice regarding many of the courses and topics they study. Training for democracy requires schools that strongly value students’ freedom, empowering them, to the extent possible, to choose their future. One’s fate as an adult should not be overly determined by a school counselor, nor influenced greatly by standardized test scores, or fixed by one’s high school record.

A student’s school experience must offer the opportunity to choose for themselves at least some of what they learn. This freedom to choose is critical for broadening youth’s exposure to diverse perspectives and building their ability to objectively analyze and evaluate conflicting information. In addition, these skills are likely to enhance their appreciation of democratic principles, values, and ideals. That is what we in education should want as outcomes for our youth, given that we task them with the continuation of our democracy.

In my belief system, which is, admittedly, greatly influenced by John Dewey, democratic schools should promote the talents and preferences expressed by their students and not be swayed by the desires of industry or the Department of Labor’s annual report on the best-paying jobs of the future. My “apprenticeship” view of democracy grants youth a modicum of freedom and accommodates to at least some of their desires. It also supports those schools and educators that directly or indirectly challenge the often-rigid educative dictates of federal mandates and state boards of education.

Federal programs such as “No Child Left Behind,” “Race for the Top,” and the “Every Child Succeeds Act” do not foster students’ ability to make many choices for themselves. Instead,

they are all about doing things *for* students by doing something *to* students and their teachers. In the last few decades, developing student autonomy and responsibility, attributes needed to be a productive citizen, have not been a priority. Ignoring our student's freedom to make at least some decisions about their learning is to blithely prepare students for a life prescribed and proscribed by others, aiding in their preparation for life in autocratic, dictatorial, or even tyrannical societies.

All U.S. students should be considered apprentices in our democracy. Even a small degree of freedom to suggest and choose at least some of their educational experiences provides this kind of apprenticeship. Despite research showing the success of this approach, offering students a reasonable amount of freedom of choice is frightening for many parents, administrators, and school board members. The primary study demonstrating success in such environments is called "The Eight-Year Study" (Aiken, 1942). This monumental study is nearly 100 years old, and because of that it is often ignored. But age alone is not the only reason it is poorly cited. It is often overlooked because too many adults do not recognize that children can be responsible enough to make some of their own decisions. It may also be rarely cited because the report came out just as World War II started, and thus its findings were buried by history. Regardless, it provides crucial evidence for empowering youth and educators to support non-standard learning experiences.

From 1930 to 1942, researchers studied over 1,400 students in 30 unique "progressive" high schools. Participating high schools agreed to use a non-standard curriculum. Students were required to study some of their states' basic curricula. However, they also received credit for choosing to study, think, write about, and build almost anything they wanted. Students were encouraged to engage in highly unusual, self-determined projects and papers, few of which would have been approved had they been subject to the standard high school curriculum of their time.

The Eight-Year Study Revisited notes that 1,475 students who attended these progressive schools, studying a *non-standard* high school curriculum went on to about 300 colleges and universities between 1936-1939 (Lipka et al., 1968; p. 130). Each graduate was matched with a traditional school graduate with similar background characteristics as a control. Researchers continued to monitor and document student progress and achievements. Many educators thought it would be difficult for these students to compete in college as they did not study the standard, state-sanctioned curriculum. Therefore, the universities were also asked to monitor for deficits since the students had not been "properly prepared" for college.

Regardless of the college attended, analyses showed that the progressive school graduates showed more leadership; joined and led more clubs; were rated as thinking more clearly; had a greater interest in books, music, and art; got slightly better grades than those from traditional schools; and *demonstrated a better understanding of democracy*. They also won more academic honors (e.g., Phi Beta Kappa and honor roll designations).

A sub-study of graduates from the six most progressive schools, what traditionalists considered the "wildest" schools, revealed that these students not only scored well above traditionally educated students, they even surpassed their peers from other progressive schools! Furthermore, these supposedly "inadequately educated students," deprived of the standard state-sanctioned curriculum, achieved the highest college grades. They were also rated the highest in intellectual drive, thinking ability, and extracurricular activity participation. What more could a democracy ask for from the students it educates, those who soon will be citizens registering to vote?

The scholars concluded that the widespread belief that students must have a prescribed school curriculum *is not tenable*. Instead, they said that studying almost anything broadly and in-depth, with some (but not necessarily a lot of) teacher support, and reporting it out, prepares youth for the highest levels of scholarship. I agree. There were no apparent negative effects from studying "this" instead of "that" *if it was studied well*.

The lesson *not* learned from this research is that learning seriously and deeply, then sharing that knowledge with one's peers, parents, and the school faculty via various platforms (e.g., papers, PowerPoint, YouTube, film, television, music, art, etc.), presents a viable alternative to learning only the required state or district curriculum. In other words, self-chosen educational experiences bestow apprenticeship-based learning opportunities unavailable through mandated curricula.

In Schools that Practice Democracy, Democracy Might be Learned

Regardless of how students engage with the curriculum, it is highly unlikely that apprenticeship-based learning will occur if school systems are not run democratically. Noted educator and school principal Debbie Meier (2021) asks:

Can a school divided by class and race, built around authoritarian principles, reasonably be expected to “train” or educate the future citizens of our state in the workings of democracy? If democracy were really such a great idea—one we claim to go to war to save—how come our public schools are anything but? In fact, I'd argue that America's schools, on average, represent one of the most authoritarian institutions in society. (p. 163)

Meier notes that schools best *serve* democracy by *being* democracies. They must be designed and operated for the people, by the people. Sadly, students attending almost all U.S. schools rarely have personal experiences with democratically run schools. This limits the opportunity of students to serve an apprenticeship in democracy.

To achieve something close to actual democratic schooling, Meier believes that each school should have its own school board. She argues that local schools cannot be considered democratically run if they are not *independently* designing educational experiences and debating educational issues. She posits that local school board members should include teachers, parents, students, and community representatives. Each local school board would link to the district's board because that is where centralized administrative decisions are made, especially fiscal ones. Moreover, district school boards are linked to state boards and legislatures, which are responsible for the administrative law and funding under which local schools operate. This hierarchy provides a system of accountability while permitting individual schools autonomy in meeting student needs and ensuring culturally relevant, equitable engagement.

In addition, Meier emphasizes that a democratically run school should pick its principal, or at a minimum, its lead educator, and not be assigned one by a centralized board. For, how can a school be called a democratic workplace if those that work there do not have a vote on who leads them?

Finally, Meier suggests that democratically run schools must be open for parents and others to visit, and data on that school's performance needs to be available to anyone interested. Of these recommendations, the only ones currently utilized by public, charter, and magnet schools (schools offering specialized instruction such as STEM or vocational training) are the last two. Most, if not all public schools, are open to parents that wish to participate in their child's education, and school and district data are freely available through the Institute of Education Sciences' National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education website. While these criteria are essential, they alone do not create democratic institutions. Meier notes, sadly, that students attending almost all public, private, and charter schools read about, but rarely have personal experience with schools that are democratically run. This common state of affairs limits students from serving any sort of an apprenticeship in democracy.

Assessment Practices and Conflicts with Democratic Learning

In the last few decades, more and more schools and districts have become less democratic due to concerns about America's allegedly low achievement, as demonstrated by standardized test scores. There is considerable evidence that the nation has panicked over state, national, and international assessment scores. In trying to raise those scores, America's leaders have often undermined democratic processes in school after school (cf. Davis, 2010). The knee-jerk reaction to purportedly low scores has been to teach to the test, leading to a narrowing of each states' curriculum.

For example, before Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, social studies in elementary schools were taught an average of 239 minutes a week. After nationwide testing mandates were enacted, class time in social studies decreased to 164 minutes a week. A loss of 76 minutes a week. This was a 32% drop in course work such as geography, economics, culture, history, political science, and government. Science education was also reduced by 33%. Additionally, coursework in art and music was reduced by 35%, and physical education was reduced by 35% as schools dedicated more time to meeting testing goals (Center on Education Policy, 2008, p. 4; also see *Educating for American Democracy [EAD]*, 2021). In a test-oriented culture, what gets tested is what gets taught. Thus, courses on government, civics and history have lost out to courses that might improve test scores in reading and mathematics.

The tests most valued by our legislative leaders assess reading, writing, and mathematics, although all who think about it know our schools are tasked with teaching more than the "three R's." Unfortunately, neither a broad education for our children nor education for a democratic living are explicit congressional goals. Instead, economic and military concerns define current thinking and legislative activities. This shortsightedness and our failure to practice democratic education is a bi-partisan failure.

The uncompromising testing culture that we have created has given rise to some occasionally bizarre behavior among administrators and educators. Perhaps, the most vivid example is from a middle school teacher with 18 years of experience who was interviewed for a Texas case study (Foster, 2006). The teacher reported that her principal was angry because scores on tests used to assess students during the school year were not better. The principal worried that poor performance on the interim tests would result in low scores on the upcoming TAKS test and confronted his staff during a faculty meeting. He was so vehement and threatening that the faculty called the police. According to a 2008 *San Antonio Express-News* account of the incident, the principal told his teachers that if the TAKS scores were not as good as expected, "I will kill you all and kill myself." He added, "You don't know how ruthless I can be." More concerning, however, is that this extreme example is not isolated. The power of assessment practices to corrupt educational personnel is quite strong, and the practices associated with democracy are corrupted as well.

Mandated testing has propagated a nationwide attitude of "success by any means." The Atlanta Public School system in Atlanta, GA, is a prime example of what happens when test results take precedence over concerns for learning (Vogell, 2011). School leaders were discovered to have either changed test scores or forced teachers to do so. Democracy, professionalism, and empathy for students fled schools as teachers were forced to cheat to protect their jobs. An 800-page report of the Atlanta cheating scandal (Martel, 2011) documents the "culture of fear, intimidation, and retaliation" teachers face in schools nationwide, where test scores are prioritized and democratic processes ignored (p. 1). Under such high-pressure conditions, abusive administrative behavior became common, undermining desires for democratic school environments for teachers and their students. This is the point of Debbie Meier's concerns, noted above.

The prevailing, excessive U.S. testing culture stresses our schools, teachers, and students. Stressed schools are less likely to pay attention to democratic processes and traditions. As is the case of winning any war (in this case, the “war” to retain U.S. competitiveness), excuses can easily be found for suspending or limiting democratic processes. Only in the case of physical conflict *might* such excuses ever be justifiable. They can certainly *never* be justifiable in the case of our children’s and our democracy’s future.

In systems of education where test scores matter most, we frequently hear disturbing statements from educators. For example, one Colorado elementary school teacher noted that “...We don’t take as many field trips. We don’t do community outreach like we used to, like visiting the nursing home or cleaning up the park because we had adopted a park, and that was our job, to keep it clean. Well, we don’t have time for that anymore” (Taylor et al., 2003; p. 30). Another Colorado teacher says, “We only teach to the test even at 2nd grade and have stopped teaching science and social studies” (Taylor et al., 2003; p. 31). These examples are two decades old, but no different from the conversations I have with contemporary administrators and teachers who are also subject to testing pressures. These issues have not gone away.

But what about our students? A case study of a Texas high school found that its high-stakes testing culture hindered any modicum of democratic expression among many of the Chicano juniors that were studied. Prior to 2017, Texas students were required to take the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) test, which measured students’ mastery of the state-mandated curriculum. Passing the test was required to graduate high school (Texas Education Agency, 2017). However, the Latino students observed (attendees of an English class at Parker High School in Parkerville, Texas) were given no choice, had few of the skills that were to be measured, and showed no interest in taking the test, as demonstrated below. This transcript is from a class where the teacher is preparing students for the TAKS. Ph.D. Candidate Sandra Foster recorded it as part of her dissertation work, titled *How Latino Students Negotiate the Demands of High-Stakes Testing: A Case Study of One School in Texas* (2006).

The scenario begins with the young Anglo teacher (T) handing out an essay like those that are to be written by the students (S) during the test:

T: Okay, this is last-minute work for TAKS. You can pass the test. You don’t want to take it again, right?

S: No response.

T: You don’t want to have to all practice again, right?

S: No response.

T: Please say yes.

S: No response.

T: You are brilliant.... The test is not hard. Take your time; in fact, take all the time you need.

S: No response.

T: Remember, be here for the test and give it all you got—take your time and do your best.

S: No response.

T: You’re awesome. If someone tells you differently, don’t listen to them. Don’t be afraid to use those dictionaries. If you don’t know a word, look it up. If you want to use another word, look it up.

S: No response.

T: Okay, there will be three types of open-ended questions and three types of literary selections. What does literary mean?

S: No response.

T: Is it fiction, non-fiction, or biography?

S: No response.

T: Are you going to talk to me, or you don't know?

S: No response.

T: It's fiction, y'all (in an angry voice). (Pause) First thing you do is answer the question. It must be insightful and thoughtful. Do not restate the question. You have five lines to fill in. Then you have to support a response. If you summarize in an open-ended question, you get a zero. But if you use support for the passage, you get points. Look at this essay. Do you see how this student used textual support?

S: No response.

T: Come on! (in an angry voice and shaking her head, signaling "no"). Oh, before I forget, it is important that you must stay inside the box, and you must use all five lines.

S: No response.

T: See how this student answered the question with insightful evidence?

S: No response.

And so it goes! Another exciting day at an American high school marked only by passive resistance to what the students accurately perceive to be an inferior education. Surely, we fail these students by not encouraging a sense of agency, a characteristic of democratic living that should be equally important as proficiency in the English language and in basic mathematics. Sadly, we may be teaching these students docility, instead. Or worse, we may have been preparing them for a life of servitude rather than active participation in our democracy.

Joint Effects of a Testing Culture and COVID-19 on Learning about Democracy

As indicated above, the testing movement has affected America's students and educators. One less noticed way that occurred was through the loss of school-sponsored extracurricular experiences intended to foster the growth of students into the kinds of concerned and productive citizens on which a democracy depends. School visits from firefighters, police officers, emergency room technicians, or visits to where those adults worked, were curtailed. Visits to art museums and artists' studios, musician practice halls, the mayor's office, the municipal water works, a refuse recycling plant, and so forth were also curtailed. In a test-dominated culture, activities such as these "waste time" that could better be spent preparing for a test! The COVID-19 pandemic, and new school liability laws, decreased the visits by key community members to America's schools, and also decreased visits by our students to community facilities in their neighborhood.

These cumulative influences suggest that today's school-age youth have lost some of the broader educational experiences that influence their understanding of democratic life. They have not met with the people and learned about the institutions that make communities work in a democracy. Perhaps sadder, is the fact that much of the information that youth learn about our nation and how it functions, comes from social media, which is too often biased or misleading.

Freedom of Information: Compromising a Right of Individuals in a Democratic Nation

Books, television shows, radio broadcasts, newspapers, and social media in many autocratic nations are censored, and those espousing democratic ideas are banned. This practice is meant to keep citizens unaware of what is happening in their nation, and perhaps preventing them from rebelling against those in power. Authoritarian governments and dictatorships try to control information, but censorship also may have its roots in racial hatred, to maintain economic power, or to promote religious domination. Thus, it is quite concerning to learn who, and what ideology, is behind the recent alarming increase in banning books in U.S. public school libraries.

According to a recent report (Friedman & Johnson, 2022) 1,648 unique book titles by 1,261 authors have been banned in 138 school districts in 32 states. Texas leads the nation with 751-1,000 bans, followed by Florida (501-750), then Tennessee and New York (251-500). Twenty-eight other states have banned 50 or fewer books. The most censored books deal with LGBTQ+ subject matter (41%), and those whose primary characters are non-white or deal with race and racism (40%). Notably, 161 or 10% of banned books dealt with rights and activism. Censorship limits youth's access to a wide range of perspectives and ideas (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). Moreover, it reinforces racism and prejudices and undermines two key tenets of U.S. democracy—freedom of information and speech. Therefore, censorship is not merely undemocratic; it is anti-democratic.

Members of democratic societies need access to trustworthy news representing a vast array of themes, ideas, and perspectives. This array must include views that may be offensive, even repugnant, for many people, such as books that support anti-democratic ideals (e.g., *Mein Kampf*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the *Communist Manifesto*, and books on the Ku Klux Klan). Yet, we need these books to understand how human society has evolved. Banning books like these because they are “dangerous,” or subversive, ensures ignorance about our world, and that is not healthy in a democracy.

I must confess that one of the proudest days I ever had as a professor/scholar/ author, was when I joined the elite in the humanities and sciences. Two of my writings were banned in my home state of Arizona! *The Manufactured Crisis* (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) and a chapter titled “If the Underlying Premise for No Child Left Behind Is False, How Can that Act Solve Our Problems?” The chapter appeared in a book edited by Ken Goodman and others with the subversive title “*Saving Our Schools* (Goodman et al., 2004). My dangerous ideas were right up there with other authors whose books were banned on that same day, including books by James Baldwin (*The Fire Next Time*), William Shakespeare (*The Tempest*) Henry David Thoreau (*Civil Disobedience*), Jonathan Kozol (*Savage Inequalities*), and bell hooks (*Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*).

Minority youth, be they Jewish, Black, Muslim, queer, trans, or other youth, need to see themselves in the books they read to understand where they fit in the world. Overly concerned citizens, looking to protect children by maintaining ignorance, defeat our nation's attempts to keep our democracy from sliding into a more totalitarian state. Unfortunately, it is not just individual people who want to protect kids. Numerous activist groups with religious or political agendas, and even government officials, have pushed for book bans (Friedman & Johnson, 2022).

These book banners may claim they are acting under the guise of patriotism. However, they are more likely to be hiding the fact that they want to keep youth and the public ignorant of the vast literature on alternatives to capitalist America. For example, Northern European nations are quite content with their various forms of socialism. Moreover, in these nations, democracy and socialism are strongly linked together. These alternatives to capitalist America are described and evaluated in the books and magazines that reside in school and public libraries across the nation. The Daily KOS (2022), commenting on the current book banning, said:

This was never about keeping kids “safe,” but has always been about keeping people uneducated and ignorant. Suppressing diverse ideas has always been the hallmark of conservatism, and free libraries stand in the way of their goal. Libraries help people who need it most, which, according to a right-wing billionaire, is the worst possible use of resources. Libraries serve their community without regard for profit, which is antithetical to the capitalist mindset that their wealthy de-funders have. Yet education and easy access to information are the greatest threats to the conservative movement and to the protection of their ill-gotten wealth. Of course, they are attacking libraries—and schools. (para. 13)

Youth do not need censors. They need access, as well as parents, educators, librarians, and school counselors who are knowledgeable and supportive. But to provide youth these resources requires an expenditure of public funds. And collecting tax money for paying such professionals is much more difficult than pushing to ban books and squelching free thinking.

Keeping our libraries open and our librarians both well trained and well paid is a necessity for a healthy democracy. Librarians are literary experts with the knowledge to advise students and citizens alike about books and other educative resources to satisfy their curiosity and research interests. As Franklin Roosevelt said in a letter to a book publisher, “I have an unshaken conviction that democracy can never be undermined if we maintain our library resources and a national intelligence capable of utilizing them” (Daily Kos, 2022, epigraph). Roosevelt seems to be saying something about reciprocity: good schools need good libraries, and sound libraries help build sound schools—the kinds of schools that provide us with a high level of national intelligence.

Public Schools: Strengthening Democracy at the Local Level

As Singer (2017) noted, public schools serve many purposes that are often forgotten. For example, our nation’s schools frequently are at the heart of the communities they serve. They offer extracurricular activities for youth, such as sporting events and academic clubs, often providing public use of swimming pools, tennis courts, and baseball fields—facilities for community activities. They invite community members to school events, such as concerts, plays, and seminars. They also support continuing education courses for adults, especially in immigrant communities. Such activities contribute to the health of our communities and thus, the health of our democracy.

Singer also notes that public school systems recognize diverse community needs and, for years, have provided residents with a choice of schools. Today, the word “choice” seems to have been appropriated by those running private, voucher, or charter schools, but large urban districts have offered magnet or theme schools for decades. Furthermore, public schools typically offer a wide variety of classes and curricula, providing students with choices in foreign language, or choices of vocational and technical curricula, as well as choices in the arts and humanities.

Public schools also regularly provide access to independent studies, advanced placement, and college credit courses. In addition, students can take advantage of a plethora of services that personalize their academic experience, such as enrollment in special or gifted education. In short, as *public* entities, public school districts and schools offer a great deal of the choice that young people and their parents need and want. Unregulated and unsupervised private schools, and many voucher or public charter schools, are not as likely to offer this variety of choices.

Compared to private schooling, public education frequently has something else needed in American democracy—a diverse student body. John Dewey noted decades ago that schooling is life itself—it is not separate from life. Thus, students learn a lot more than reading, writing, and arithmetic in the public schools they attend; they learn how to interact with different kinds of people. They learn to share the world with humans from various racial, ethnic, and religious

backgrounds, as well as those with unconventional sexual identities. It is quite likely that the more diverse the environment our youth grow up in, the better adjusted they become as adults. Graduates from these environments are often less racist, sexist, and prejudiced than those who attend schools with homogenous student bodies, as is regularly found in charter, voucher, private, and religious schools (Peshkin, 1986).

Singer (2017) also points out that public schools are more fiscally responsible. Compared to private schools, public school expenditures are precisely that—public! Thus, the likelihood is greater that they will spend money more wisely than would charter or voucher schools. This is partly because their fiscal records are an open book, as should be the books of any organization receiving the public's money. In the rare instances where public school employees break the law and try to embezzle funds, they are much more likely to be caught because fiscal records are readily accessible.

It is important to realize that because public schools use taxpayer dollars, they belong to us, to we, the people. Thus, if any citizen wants to exert their authority, they can usually do so. In a sense, public schools are run by our friends, neighbors, and co-workers. These “locals” live in our neighborhoods and sit on our school boards, parent teacher associations and organizations (PTAs, PTOs), and advisory councils, all run by local folks. That is not necessarily true of charter, voucher, and private schools, more typically run by appointed boards of directors who may not be local. Whoever they are, they certainly are not beholden to local citizens or parents (cf. Berliner, 2021). The administrators and boards of these schools are more likely to be a schools' owners and investors. Parents and local citizens can find reaching them challenging, compared to their experiences with public schools.

Public schools accept donations, and sometimes teachers ask for help, but if parents cannot (or will not) send in such things as pencils or tissues, the school provides it, *gratis*. When a district does not (or cannot) provide what is needed, teachers will often make up the difference from their own pockets (Litvinov, 2022). On average, public school teachers spend over \$500 each year on their classrooms. In private and charter schools, this rarely happens. Furthermore, special education and gifted child programs rarely exist in these schools. In our nation's public schools, such programs are common, and they are often first-rate. Additionally, public schools provide transportation (school buses, vouchers for public transportation, etc.), which private and charter schools rarely provide.

Another characteristic of public schools that is admirable is their reliability. Neighborhood public schools will almost always be there. This is not necessarily true of charter and voucher schools. When you send your child to these schools, you never know if they will be there tomorrow (Local 6, 2015). They open and close regularly.

Yet, another difference between public schools and private, voucher, and charter schools is that they do not have to accept your child (Simon, 2013). Public schools do. They are required by law to educate every child in their district, including homeless children and those who are disabled. Only under extreme circumstances do public schools expel a young person. Indeed, there are public-school scandals about *who* is expelled and *why*. Investigations of these incidents frequently expose systemic bias and racism among teachers and school leaders. But that's the point. It's not that public schools do not sometimes do awful things; *it is that the actions of the public schools become public!* Charter and voucher schools can keep their prejudices hidden and intact.

Data collected worldwide suggests the frequent advantage of charter, voucher, and independent private schools on standardized achievement tests, when compared to public schools, is because of *who* attends those schools. It is not because their curriculum and instruction are superior. More likely, family wealth and social class status are the more powerful determinants of their test scores. Of note is that when the socioeconomic characteristics of public and non-public school

attendees are statistically controlled, public school students academically outperform private, charter, and religious school students (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014). Thus, public schools are not only far more likely to teach for democratic living effectively, but students also do better academically.

Authoritarian Nations and Education

This essay opened with my ChatGPT query about how our public schools contribute to democracy. I also asked ChatGPT, “What is the role of education in an authoritarian nation?” The answer I received is just as predictable as was the answer about the role our public schools play in a democracy. Developing a consensus from millions of pages of scanned text, ChatBot stated that the role of schools in authoritarian nations is the maintenance of power by an administration. Schools in such societies function as a way to control its citizens. In America’s almost 100,000 public schools we must always guard against the techniques of those authoritarian schools that ChatBot has identified: excessive control of behavior; limits on information that is shared; propaganda more frequent than fact in courses on history, civics and government; and limits on the expression of dissent.

Conclusion

ChatGPT was quite clear about the positive relationship between U.S. public schools and our American democracy. It was also clear about the contrasts between how U.S. schools should function to promote democracy, and how school’s function in authoritarian nations. I have added some concerns and cautions to the response of my Chatbot. First, I point out that when public schools focus their curriculum on employability, it may not be as good for democracy as promoting learning for life and for active participation. Second, students learn democratic ideology and critical thinking skills needed to be informed, active citizens, if they are allowed to self-initiate curriculum choices, investigate topics of interest deeply, and present their findings to peers, educators, families, and community members. Third, I argue that democracy is difficult to teach and learn about in schools that do not run as democratic institutions. Sadly, most do not. In too many of America’s schools it is harder, if not impossible, for students to see democracy in action. Fourth, I noted that the relationship between students learning about our democracy and school accountability that relies heavily upon standardized testing is rarely discussed. When districts and administrators emphasize school and student accountability, students are less likely to be engaged in democratic thinking and acting. Typically, issues about education for democracy is not debated by, nor is it a priority of, those making educational policy. Furthermore, school disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and new liability laws have negatively affected learning for democratic living by limiting access to extra-curricular experiences, such as field trips and school visits from those that make our democracy work (government officials, firefighters, police officers, etc.).

Finally, I address the recent verbal and physical attacks on educators and librarians, and book banning, all of which are anti-democratic actions. Particularly worrisome is the expressed desire by some parents and politicians to ignore or punish youth when issues related to gender identity or political organizing by students arise. Of concern is that our students are too often observing non-democratic adult models, and youth learn from adult models. This does not bode well for the future of our democracy. On a positive note, schools are intricately tied to their communities. Their contributions to communal democratic ways of life may be inestimable.

Both democratic and non-democratic forces are always at play in our schools. They always have been. But I fear that today, we may be seeing too many non-democratic ways of living together

and of schooling our children. We need more thought about this, because as the twig is bent, so grows the child.

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