

Editor's Introduction: In Search of the Common Good

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While teaching a certification course entitled *Issues and Reforms in American Secondary Schools*, I sought to contextualize some of our country's current schooling issues with the help of the Public Broadcasting System's popular video *The Merrow Report: In Schools We Trust*. At the heart of John Merrow's historical documentary are two questions: What is the purpose of public schools? And who determines their direction? While Merrow's documentary discusses a broad array of cultural and political influences within the 150 or so years that communities within the United States have provided public schooling, one influence remains as a pervasively "felt presence" throughout the report. At times it is presented as the dominant educational stance within a particular era, while at other times it appears to have been almost eclipsed by a call to move "back to the basics" or towards an emphasis on increased economic security.

However, this "felt presence" is a reality—that in spite of often concentrated efforts to do so—is difficult to ignore. No matter what various politicians or citizen groups have argued should be the purpose of the public schools, the fact remains that our educational systems operate within a country that claims a democratic form of government; the very nature of which indicates the necessity of providing educational opportunities for all. To divorce the purposes of our public schools from our political identity is a dangerous thing. To ignore the connections between the public schools and democracy is to make those schools expendable—to ignore the common good. Therefore, rather than argue about whether or not schools should "inculcate students with democratic

values,” we should focus on exploring the ways in which our schools and society might move beyond narrowly individualistic perceptions of what contributing to a democracy can mean.

Although it would be a mistake to reduce this issue’s authors’ meaning-making solely to an exploration of democracy, their writings do contribute to an increased understanding of what educating towards and contributing to the common good can mean. Among others, this issue grapples with democracy-related questions such as: What does it mean to implement effective instruction that honors the needs of all individuals within science classrooms? What are some of the ways, in which we can equip students to act as effective citizens in an era of globalization? What can educational researchers, teachers, and administrators learn about the common good from groups who have left public schools for other educational options? And in what ways do the ethical considerations that contribute to American perceptions of work, tell us something about the place of community in relation to individual interests and economic production within our society? Although diverse in content, each incorporates a “felt presence” that is uniquely democratic; a concern for the common good is pervasive.

Five of this issue’s eight articles deal directly with educational theory and practice in ways that also connect to life and growth within a democratic society. In “Critical Constructivism for Teaching and Learning in a Democratic Society,” Michael Bentley, Stephen C. Fleury, and Jim Garrison point out that the version of constructivism that has been most widely accepted among mainstream teacher educators has been “trivialized,” in that it is often devoid of reflection, social consciousness, and democratic citizenship. The authors caution that when constructivism is decontextualized in this way, the danger exists that pre-service teachers will view constructivism as just one more teaching technique; which, in turn, will put them at risk of “fail[ing] to become aware of the political consequences of particular pedagogical decisions.” Although careful to explain that recipe approaches to teaching a critical constructivism do not exist, the authors describe process-oriented frameworks that often lead pre-service science and social studies teachers towards a critical understanding of constructivism and its potentially positive role in educating for the common good.

Also emphasizing constructivist theory/practice is the article “A Reflective Discourse on Science Learning and the Merits of Simulation.” Janet Kelly, Curtis Bradley, Jonathan Gratch, and Robert Maninger, seek to equip science teachers to act as “change agents” within their own classroom communities through the use of well-designed simulations that act as complements to laboratory experiences.

Reminiscent of Deweyan notions of experience and educational growth, Vincent E. Izegbu's "Students as Designers of their own Life Curricula: Reconstruction of Experience in Education through Thoughtful Deliberative Action" depicts some of the ways in which teachers can empower their students by constructing a democratic classroom environment through enacting a "curriculum of life." Izegbu's piece demonstrates that working in concert, teachers and students can "broaden the conception of curriculum to include life experiences in a way that interweaves school and outside school curriculum in classrooms." What is especially promising about his life curriculum is that it not only equips students to take responsibility for their own learning and enables them to make informed choices, but it also actively integrates curricula with their lived experiences. Curriculum cannot be separated from what Izegbu describes as "deep seated meaning that informs behavior and builds character through skills, knowledge, and dispositions acquired in life." Students are prepared, then, to contribute to a democratic society in deeply meaningful ways.

A fourth article dealing directly with some of the ways in which educational practice and theory influence the common good is Jack Martin's "A Case Against Heightened Self-Esteem as an Educational Aim." He notes that in spite of the fact that there is little research-based support for the notion that enhancing students' self-esteem will reap positive results, it remains a current educational emphasis. Although the history of this emphasis has been rather short, Martin is able to trace what he cites as an "erosion of social, political, and moral considerations" within those theories and programs that support promoting self-esteem as an educational goal. Central to his concern is the idea that an undue focus on enhancing students' self-esteem will be incompatible with the goal of helping students to develop social perspectives that are necessary for their development as productive citizens.

Also concerned with curricula and educational structures is the article "Resisting Bureaucracy: A Case Study of Home Schooling." Rather than marginalize home schooling families through the assumption that they have "abandoned" both public schooling and the public good, the authors—Jean A. Patterson, Ian Gibson, Andrew Koenigs, Michael Maurer, Gladys Ritterhouse, Charles Stockton, and Mary Jo Taylor—contend that insights received from home school families hold the potential to disrupt "the bureaucratic assumptions that underlie public education," thereby providing educators with "a useful framework for analysis." Not only does their study speak to necessary curricular changes, but it also illustrates the potential effectiveness of dialogic perspectives and practices when working towards the common good.

Author David Pickus illustrates the creative tension that exists when educators work towards a pedagogy that is authentic in terms of dealing with our democratic society's changing perspectives of the value and position of the humanities. In his aptly named article "Walter Kaufmann and the Future of Humanities," Pickus utilizes Kaufmann's (1977) *The Future of Humanities* to inform his own critique of some of the ways in which contemporary pedagogical practices can promote versions of the humanities that have the potential to remain "viable" throughout societal changes. Once again a democratic "felt presence" is evident, in that Pickus repeatedly points to our collective need to reflect on our purposes for education, which is, of course, a consideration of the common good.

Richard G. Lyons' "Towards a Theory of Work Satisfaction: An Examination of Karl Marx and Frederick Herzberg" also contains important considerations for work and education, in that he discusses the ethical considerations that motivate Americans to spend more time working than any other country in the western world. Grappling with Karl Marx's ethical model and Frederick Herzberg's psychological model, Lyons' critique provides readers with insights into some of the complex ways, in which production concerns, individual interests / talents, and democratic concerns (i.e., interest in community issues) intersect to inform Americans' perspectives and choices regarding work. While economic and production concerns play a part, this piece also implicitly indicates that democratic values are a pervasive part of our individual and societal decision making, a felt democratic presence is integral to his critique.

Moving beyond a distinctively American form of citizenship, author Stephen R. White's contribution, "Aurobindo's Thought and Holistic Global Education," takes a decidedly spiritual turn with the purpose of seeking the common good at a global level. Within his opening paragraph, White explains that

...humankind now has a collective responsibility to facilitate the construction of a shared global culture through educational socialization. This is particularly true for those of us who are committed to educating toward a future existence where peaceful cooperation and planetary citizenship become dominate values that are held in the same high regard as nationalism and individualism are today.

Describing the life and philosophy of Sri Ghose Aurobindo, White maintains that the renowned sage considered teachers to be leaders or "evolution agents" in a movement towards the common good at a global level. Global unity would be reached as human beings took part in their own evolution through nurturing their collective energy.

Also reflecting democratic concerns, one of this issue's two book

reviews also focuses on promoting the common good at a global level. Reese H. Todd opens her review of Nel Nodding's edited volume *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness* with a telling question:

In an era of narrowed curriculum, can educators turn away from the notion of citizenship education as preparing students to succeed in a *competitive* world and prepare students, instead, for successful living in a *cooperative* world?

Much like White's interpretation of Aurobindo, Todd reports that the collection of essays within Nodding's book points to teachers as change agents, in that they are the ones best suited "to take the responsibility to create windows to a larger world," and "to reshape understandings of citizenship within the 21st century...."

William Hull's review of Decker Walker's *Fundamentals of Curriculum: Passion and Professionalism* also portrays teachers as potential leaders within democratic societies, in that Walker describes curriculum as "the vehicle through which America's identity is shaped." Not only does Hull's review reveal some of the ways in which Walker links public schools and their associated curricula with the welfare of our democratic society, but it also touches on the evolution of curriculum within American educational history. Reflecting American pragmatism, Walker's text—Hull tells us—provides practical curricular applications for classroom teachers. Democracy's "felt presence" is pervasive throughout the reviewer's book.

Once again, readers of this issue are invited to consider the diverse ways in which our schools and society can join together in an ongoing and vitally necessary search for the common good.