

GET IT TOGETHER: EDUCATION IN A DANGEROUS TIME

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Amidst the grim reality of COVID-19, it is clear that democracy is in grave danger in the wake of brutal loss of human and more-than-human life exacerbated by a gross denial of civil liberties and human rights worldwide (Center for Disease Control, 2020; United Nations, 2020a; 2020b). Where democracy has been usurped, centralized, and organized to ensure profits over life and freedom for diverse species, democracy has been endangered, denied, and possibly lost. However, history has taught us that we ought never underestimate our human capacities for taking ideas and bringing them creatively to action. In such moments, it is uplifting that more and more of the world's people—together with diverse more-than-human species (Lupinacci, Happel-Parkins, & Turner, 2019)—are collaborating to take action in support of social-justice and sustainability and demanding big changes from their governments. Furthermore, the demands for decentralized horizontally organized forms of mutual aid, consent, and consensus are at the forefront of such antifacist dissent (see Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, Idle No More, #Me Too, The Women's Movement in Rojava, Youth Climate Change Protests, Zapatista, etc). There is a groundswell of justice oriented activists calling for a societal change.

Writing this essay while quarantined under social distance orders and immersed in diverse and interrelated social and political movements, it has become quite clear that if there is to be any radical hope for democracy it will require us to tap into our most creative efforts in supporting a collective saying “no” to regimes of tyrannical powers and “yes” to a multitude of sustainable and socially just ways of living. It is imperative in a world fighting to do more than simply survive, that scholar-activist educators take seriously this moment to radically reconsider not only the purposes that schools have historically served in society but also to critically imagine how a purpose of schools committed to a creative democracy might serve in a different kind of society. In this essay, I share a definition of

democracy and extend an invitation to renewing school commitments to democratic decision-making asserting that all who can must be bold in the humility of failing governments and their deadly leaders ruling over a vast sea of indifference, misinformation, and distrust.

In 1963 James Baldwin in “A Talk to Teachers” wrote:

Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time...We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced...from within. To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to “go for broke.” (p. 42)

With a vested interest in democracy, human rights, and sustainability I find hope in efforts echoing and amplifying Baldwin’s call to action applied to this current planetary pause and I urge our educational communities (students, teachers, parents, school leaders, and policy makers) to strongly consider the power and possibilities of supporting democratic alternatives instead of trying to return to the status quo in our schools and communities. If we truly value democracy, we have to ask:

How might we renew our visions of schools as sites of learning to participate in, and contribute to, a democratic society?

Furthermore asking:

If democracy is a way of life, how can we define it in order to organize, and teach in support of such societal goals? How can we ensure that all students learn to respect, include, and show compassion for diversity—both cultural and biological?

Possibilities in Creative Democracies

Democracy can be an elusive term lacking creativity in education and often relegated to disconnected social studies lessons in classrooms which seem to most often refer to a co-opted system of decision making by voting and, most commonly, with an emphasis on the anti-democratic process of majority rules. I offer that we creatively simplify a definition of democratic decision-making to be understood anarchically as:

Decisions made by those directly impacted by the decisions being made—and all decisions are made in the interest of the common good.

Further pushing against anthropocentrism (extreme human-centeredness), let us define democratic decision-making as:

Decisions made by those directly impacted by the decisions being made and that includes listening to and consideration with/for diverse species and beings (Lupinacci & Edwards-Schuth, 2020, Martusewicz, et al. 2020).

As COVID-19 devastated world communities and exposed extreme malfeasance in the United States government—and global free markets, we were painfully reminded of the need for creative educational pathways which differ from the current schooling policy and practices. Uniquely this dangerous moment offers a rare opportunity for radical systemic change—one that requires many of us to think differently about how we recognize and value diversity. Educational scholars have long debated a need for renewed purposes of education to support political and economic purposes and so why not yet again but this time in favor of inclusion, diversity, multi-species rights, and sustainability.

Going for Broke: Revitalize and Amplify Democratic Projects

What if this were a moment to “go for broke” and renew schools in the interest of the now present future? Furthermore, what if the lives and freedom of all our grandchildren’s children depend on it?

James Baldwin (1963), in the address quoted earlier, challenged educators and political leaders to consider utilizing schools to build a society in which racism and related social injustices were no longer woven into the very fabric of our daily lives. While his words were a call for an informed and bold response to addressing racism in 1963 nearly thirty years after Dewey’s repeated call for educators to act seriously in the defense of democracy, the spirit of his message resonates strongly with the message from abolitionist educators and the Black Lives Matter protests of today (Love, 2019). Baldwin emphasizing the power of educators in societal change said: “The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change” (p. 42). It seems logical in such a moment that a renewed school purpose—one forged in the crucible of COVID-19 and a social uprising in the US—was a project worthy of accepting such an obligation and responsibility to democracy as a way of life. It not only makes sense but also seems to be our utmost civic duty as antifacist educators in a democratic society struggling to find humanity and harmony as we work toward a renewed democratic society before, during, and after we tackle the rise of tyrannical governments, survive a pandemic, and decide to collectively live more sustainable on the planet.

Get it Together and Make Change Happen

What would this renewed direction entail? For starters, diverse groups of scholars, educators, and community leaders getting together to collaboratively identify what it truly is that our shared communities

need and then working backwards from those needs—and including some wants along the way—asking:

How might we better organize our educational systems to truly include diverse students learning together to make decisions that support strong, local, living systems?.

When large anti-democratic systems fail our communities, they fail future generations and we are unarguably at a major crossroads with the opportunity to not go back to the way it was. Rather, why not evaluate closely what was working in favor of democracy and be honest about what no longer is relevant for the coming societies in a radically different world.

As an educator of—and co-conspirator with—some really great leaders in districts, schools, and classrooms of so-called democratic societies, I can first-hand attest that these kinds of questions have been discussed in classrooms at many of our institutions as well as in those classrooms and programs of wonderful colleagues at the many vibrant universities around the world—but to what point? What will it take to have creative democratic actions more explicitly enacted outside of those classrooms and not simply locked away in papers or kept to classroom presentations, clandestine in dissertations, or sequestered to articles obscured behind expensive paywalls? Where in the project to revitalizing democracy do we creatively demand more public engagement in the dissent against tyranny and collaborate to learn to do better and as Baldwin called for: “go for broke” (p. 42). If we think COVID-19 isn’t forcing this or at least setting the table to work from the ruins of a democracy lost, then we might be delusional.

Concluding, I propose continued collaboration to fight free markets, facism, and tyranny word-wide with deepened commitments to continue having these conversations openly and together as we amplify diverse democratic projects word-wide. Furthermore, with

nearly everyone with, or near, school-age children now spearheading their nation's educational futures in their apartments, living rooms, and home offices or sitting in cars and outside or sitting outside anywhere the internet might be available; we might take this moment to abandon schools as they were and rebuild for democratic futures. The point being that any educator serious about our obligations and responsibilities in a democracy should be pushing harder than ever for 2020 to be the moment public education turns full attention to renewing a collective effort to organize in a revitalization of democracy, multispecies rights (social justice and environmental justice), and sustainability. While I could go on and on with suggestions but that would negate the point of this essay. I am writing here asking us to simply slow down, go for broke, and ask the larger question: *What ought to be the purpose of schools in the coming weeks, months, and years?* If we desire a socially just and sustainable democratic society then these are dangerous times that require we fight creatively and with all our diverse abilities for democracy. As Baldwin (1963) asked of teachers, if we believe society needs to change then we must get it together "no matter what risk" because "this is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change" (p. 4s)

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