

Examining Dispositions for Social justice and Democracy in the Context of the Public Purposes of Education

Tina Jacobowitz, Monclair State University

Nicholas M. Michelli, Graduate Center of the

City University of New York

Lori Marulli, Bridgewater-Raritan Regional School District

Abstract

In this article we explore the importance of dispositions and relate them to the public purposes of education in a democracy. We define these purposes as “access to knowledge and critical thinking,” “socially just democratic participation,” “access to life’s chances” and “leading rich and rewarding personal lives.” We also clarify and operationalize the concept of dispositions by offering concrete examples of what dispositions for social justice and democracy look like in action.

Introduction

It is commonplace for those who prepare teachers—including those in colleges of education, in arts and science programs, and in P-12 schools—to speak of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions future teachers need. Historically the major accrediting body for teacher education, NCATE (The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) has expected dispositions to be a part of curriculum and assessment.

What are Dispositions?

It is critical that educators committed to the work of The Agenda for Education in a Democracy come to a consensus as to what dispositions are as well as what we mean by dispositions for social justice. Social justice, democracy, and the role of dispositions are essentially contested concepts that seem to arouse emotional responses depending on one's perspective. Unless we are clear about what we mean by social justice, democracy, and dispositions, it is likely that there will be many different iterations of what is meant. According to the late Larry Freeman, Dean-Emeritus of Governors State University (2004), there are two major views on this issue. One is that a disposition is “a tendency, a liability, a propensity to act in certain ways under certain conditions” (p. 1). The other view is that a disposition refers to “a complex [set] of attitudes, beliefs, and values” (p.1). Others bring these two views together and assert that teachers' beliefs, attitudes and values about student learning have an influence on their actions in the classroom (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Shechtman, 2002; Villegas, 2007). Based on the above views, we conclude that dispositions are a propensity to act in a particular way under particular conditions based on a set of attitudes, values, and beliefs. We also believe that specific dispositions are required to achieve the public purposes of public education in a democracy that we in the NNER value. This approach is quite different than compiling a set of abstract and generic dispositions such as “caring” and “empathy” that may be unrelated to the actions that might follow from them.

Given this view, we contend that one can only assess dispositions when they lead to actions taken in specific contexts. We need to observe certain behaviors in particular situations in order to assert that a disposition exists as part of the person's conception of education, teaching, and learning. And if the person possesses a given disposition (e.g., desiring to be fair to all students), then the nature of these characteristics can be described in how that individual would or might behave in the classroom as a future possibility in certain circumstances (Levine, 2007). While checklists and questionnaires that tap into students' beliefs, attitudes, and values may develop their awareness of the importance of valuing social justice and equity, it is only through assessment of observed behaviors in specific contexts that we can determine if students possess the requisite dispositions towards these goals.

We concur with Ana Maria Villegas, Professor of Education at Montclair State University and a well-known expert on culturally responsive teaching, who makes the argument that school professionals "have a moral and ethical responsibility to teach all of their pupils fairly and equitably... This moral and ethical dimension of teaching makes issues of social justice legitimate terrain for exploration in the preparation of prospective teachers" (Villegas, 2007, p. 371). Villegas goes on to state that "the fundamental disposition of an educator whose practice is informed by principles of social justice is the tendency to act in ways that give all students access to knowledge ... teacher education programs designed to produce such teachers must examine patterns of actions ... from which to infer that the candidate possesses that disposition" (Villegas, 2007, p. 376). In some quarters our advocacy for addressing dispositions related to social justice in preparing future educators is highly controversial. However, to achieve the public purposes of education as we envision them, it is necessary to prepare teachers who are disposed to providing a fair and equitable education to all students.

The Public Purposes of Education in a Democracy: A Framework for Educating Educators

Some educators believe that the major purpose of education is to prepare students for the work force, a view shared by many policy makers. In the current milieu one might conclude that the purpose of education is to prepare students for tests. We believe that this view is extremely limited and we posit three additional purposes of education in a democratic society. The ideas for these purposes have evolved from the work of The National Network for Educational Renewal, founded by John Goodlad and present in much of Goodlad's work, extended by the work of Michelli and Keiser in *Teacher Education for Democracy and Social Justice* (2005), and further refined in our own. The first two purposes, access to knowledge and preparation for democratic life, have been at the core of the work of the National Network for Educational Renewal. Some 40 colleges and universities in 21 settings have been developing programs that include these two ideas. We have substantial feedback on the positive effect of using these conceptions, both informally and through papers presented at the Annual Meeting of the NNER. The second two purposes, preparation for life's chances and preparation for a rich, fulfilling social life are not explicit in the NNER work, but we believe they are logical extensions of the work.

One might ask why it is important to talk about the purposes of education in a democracy. While we would hope that the distinction is obvious, we expect certain qualities of those who live in a democratic society, including openness to the ideas of others and the kind of knowledge needed to make good judgments, both in carrying out our civic responsibilities and in our personal lives. With that in mind, we turn to the purposes of education in a democracy and the dispositions related to them.

The following table summarizes our conception of the purposes, the relevant dispositions, beliefs related to the disposition, and examples of behaviors that can be taken as evidence that the disposition is present. We explore some of the connections represented in the table in the balance of this article.

Public Purposes of Education	Examples of Desired Dispositions	Examples of Related Beliefs	Examples of Related Behaviors that Evidence Desired Dispositions Consistent with the Ideas of Fairness and the Belief that All Children Can Learn
<u>Purpose 1:</u> Providing Access to Knowledge and Fostering Critical Thinking	Acting on the belief that all students can learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Knowledge is not static, but is constantly evolving. -Learners play a role in constructing their own knowledge. -Learners use knowledge to solve problems and think critically. 	<p>Whenever appropriate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Teachers create environments where students engage in critical thinking, problem-solving and experiential learning. -Teachers use constructivist pedagogy. They capitalize on students' background knowledge and experience and devise lessons that link new knowledge to what their students already know.
<u>Purpose 2:</u> Preparing Students for Critical Democratic Participation	Promoting democratic behaviors and attitudes in the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Children should learn how to be respectful of the ideas of others. -Learning to argue responsibly and to think critically are essential skills for people living in a democracy. 	<p>Whenever appropriate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Teachers engage students in discussions and debates where they can listen to other points of view and critically analyze the validity of evidence presented by others.
<u>Purpose 3:</u> Helping Students Have Full Access to Life's Chances	Promoting social justice, equity, and fairness in the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -All children must be exposed to a wide range of possibilities in their lives. -Democratic societies need to be careful about tracking students into particular careers or levels of employment too early in their lives. 	<p>Whenever appropriate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Teachers provide numerous opportunities for students to problem solve and generate possibilities by thinking outside the box. -Teachers use a variety of assessments so that students can show knowledge in different ways.
<u>Purpose 4:</u> Preparing Students to Lead Rich and Rewarding Personal Lives	Establishing a learning environment that promotes positive social and emotional growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The arts and physical education are important in developing ourselves as human beings and contribute to our happiness and well-being. - All children, regardless of race, culture, language, sexual orientation, gender, special needs, deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. 	<p>Whenever appropriate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers, regardless of their curricular areas, advocate for the inclusion of the arts and physical education in the school curriculum. -Teachers incorporate the arts into their own teaching. -Teachers incorporate multicultural literature into their curricula. -Teachers do not tolerate bullying and provide opportunities for students to discuss and reduce such incidents.

Table 1. Relationship of Public Purposes of Education to Dispositions, Beliefs, and Behaviors
Source: *Authors (Forthcoming, McGraw Hill).*

Purpose 1: Providing Access to Knowledge and Fostering Critical Thinking.

The first purpose of education in a democracy is helping all children reach high levels of understanding of the domains of knowledge (the disciplines) and to learn to think critically. Understanding content means learning to think critically about what we believe we know. A democratic state requires the education of critical, thoughtful citizens who can define their own purposes and are able and willing to act upon their ideas (O'Brien, 2006). Thinking critically and making good judgments through critical thinking is important to taking advantage of life's opportunities, and it is central to quality of life.

On the surface, providing access to knowledge is a goal all seem to agree on: a major purpose of education is to learn content. The goal, however, is embedded with a number of contested issues over which policy makers and politicians argue. What could we possibly argue about regarding this goal? Even an area as seemingly straightforward as education for "knowledge" can be contested and the position one holds related to dispositions. Do we argue that knowledge is fixed and that the purpose of school with respect to knowledge is the transmission of the culture? If so, our actions with regard to defining what knowledge is of most worth and how we will present knowledge will be clearly defined. Is knowledge a series of facts, concepts, and problems to be solved? Or is knowledge really a process? Our dispositions towards knowledge and the context in which we work, lead to our actions. For example, we could hold that ultimately knowledge is not static and changes as new knowledge is acquired, a position held by most who study within the disciplines. However, in the context of a particular class where it is concluded that the background knowledge to engage in critical thinking is not present, our disposition would lead us to treat knowledge very differently, at least initially. So we would argue that the disposition that is appropriate is critically dependent on the context, with some limits that we will explore below.

What about our dispositions towards students and their learning? Suppose that we hold the belief that the children we are work-

ing with cannot learn—for whatever reason (poverty, language acquisition, disability)—at high levels of competence. If we hold to that view as an absolute belief about these children, then we may well be doing them a serious disservice. On the other hand, if we assume that they have the background knowledge they need to learn and manipulate abstract concepts, we may be equally dis-serving them. An appropriate set of dispositions then may lead us to postpone judgment and tolerate some ambiguity until we can gather sufficient evidence through assessment of students before planning or proceeding with instruction, and to do so continuously throughout our time with a given group of students, with the ultimate view that students can learn at higher levels.

As it relates to this purpose—Providing Access to Knowledge and Fostering Critical Thinking—do we believe that the same knowledge should be taught to all children? If the answer is yes, how do we assure that it is? Consider a teacher who has a set of values and beliefs that all children should be expected to and can learn at high levels, to engage in critical thinking as essential in a democracy, and to understand that knowledge is created. Such a teacher would more likely to, and act in ways that show evidence of, engaging all students in learning that involves critical thinking, problem-solving, and experiential learning. Such learning would occur largely within communities of inquiry, where students would hear different perspectives and would be more open to modifying their own beliefs and actions. Such a classroom would develop important democratic and socially just behaviors.

Teachers possessing the dispositions necessary to achieving this purpose would use pedagogies based on constructivism. They would capitalize on students' background knowledge and experience by devising lessons that link new knowledge to what their students already know. These teachers would foster inquiry within their classrooms and would be adept at using pedagogical techniques that encourage students to ask questions and seek their own answers. They would teach students critical literacy skills and how to learn from a variety of information sources including electronic texts. Of great importance would be their own willingness to enhance their own

pedagogical skills and knowledge of ever-evolving content in their disciplines through on-going professional development, including workshops, conferences, and higher education.

We contend that a failure to include full access to knowledge and critical thinking is a matter of social injustice. We operationalize the concept of social justice by stipulating that it is living one's life and advocating for the absence of repression and discrimination on all levels. To assume that some children can learn better or more than others represses and discriminates against them. The twin ideas of nondiscrimination and nonrepression, introduced by Amy Gutman in her book *Democratic Education*, have been adopted here (Gutman, 1987).

Purpose 2: Preparing Students for Critical Democratic Participation.

Why, some have asked, is this a purpose of education? One of the most eloquent explanations for why it is an important goal of education comes from political scientist Benjamin Barber (1992):

Democracy is not a natural form of association; it is an extraordinarily rare contrivance of cultivated imagination. Empower the merely ignorant and endow the uneducated with a right to the make collective decisions and what results is not democracy but, at best, mob rule: the government of private prejudice and the tyranny of opinion—all those perversions that liberty's enemies like to pretend (and its friends fear) constitute democracy. For true democracy to flourish, however, there must be citizens. Citizens are women and men educated for excellence—by which term I mean the knowledge and competence to govern in common their own lives. The democratic faith is rooted in the belief that all humans are capable of such excellence and have not just the right but also the capacity to become citizens. Democratic education mediates the ancient quarrel between the rule of opinion and the rule of excellence by informing opinion and, through

universal education in excellence, creating an aristocracy for everyone. (p. 2)

But, even given Barber's compelling argument, we would go further. Learning to be a participant in a democracy means much more than learning to vote and much more than being educated so the right decisions are made. Democracy prevails in everyday life. Voting is an important civic obligation. But what about the "civil" aspects of living in a democracy? Most of what we would call civil attributes could also be called dispositions—clearly dispositions that imply action—but dispositions nevertheless. Among the goals that we would expect in classrooms organized to promote civil behaviors, as well as the behaviors we would expect in everyday democratic living, are learning to treat others with respect; listening carefully to other points of view; responding with and giving reasons for positions; and learning to argue well for a position and when to compromise. A teacher disposed to developing these behaviors in students is moving to prepare students to live in a democracy. These are complex dispositions that in many ways are at the core of achieving good classroom management and pursuing education for democracy.

Making commitments to democracy, to civility, to civic responsibility, and social justice as an important part of education would not displace content, but rather lead to pedagogies characterized by engaging students in discussions and debates where they can listen to other points of view and critically analyze the validity of evidence presented by others. All of the qualities we expect in democratic life could be reflected in the pedagogy employed. In the process, students would learn appropriate language for problem solving and conflict resolution in the classroom, skills important to successful participation in the society at large. This kind of socio-cultural environment is evidence of teacher dispositions towards the second public purpose of education — preparing students for critical participation in a democracy. Again, we argue that this is a matter of social justice. If some members of society understand the "system"

better than others or are better prepared to argue for their positions or to compromise, those who are not so prepared are repressed and discriminated against.

Purpose 3: Helping Students Have Full Access to Life's Chances

Of the four purposes we discuss in this article, this one is most explicitly related to social justice as it speaks to economic and social equity. The concepts embedded in it are most likely the ones that have triggered the attacks on teacher education that have occurred in recent years (see for example Will, 2006 and Hess, 2006). Many would state this purpose more simply: to help students get a good job, or to assure their place in the economy. We assert that conceiving of schools as preparing students for the economy is too narrow a goal. At one time in our history this meant vocational tracking and vocational schools. The liberal arts and science education were seen as luxuries for the elite, and specific job preparation was available for students who did not achieve high academic standards.

It can be argued that this is still the case through the differing expectations teachers have for children and the variations in the quality of education. Both in federal policy and in nearly every state, we have programs designed to support the “transition to work” of students. Some policy makers question the appropriateness of the number of students who attend higher education rather than entering the workforce. Others believe that a focus on high academic success and problem solving for all is the best way to prepare students for successful careers.

It is unfair, in our view, to hold educators responsible for the lack of equal opportunity in society at large. We do believe, however, that there are things they can do within the context of schooling that will increase their students' chances for success in life. Meeting the purpose of helping students have full access to life's chances requires preparing students to consider all the options open to them, to understand what it takes to pursue one option or another, and to embrace the chances—the opportunities—that life provides.

The philosopher Maxine Greene (2001) has said, “We can't become what we can't imagine.” Preparing students for the economy

includes having them imagine themselves as physicians, artists, business leaders, lawyers, actors, dentists, architects, poets, media workers, computer specialists, and, of course, as teachers. Providing deep knowledge about content and the opportunity to imagine their future professional possibilities is how we argue this public purpose of education in a democracy should be pursued.

We accept helping students imagine and achieve all the possibilities for their place in society and to have full access to life's chances as an important purpose of education. To achieve this we must expose students to the possibilities in life, foster imagination, and avoid the premature tracking of students into particular careers or making spurious decisions about capabilities of children. Organizing education to provide access to life's chances to all children is critical. It is, in fact, a matter of social justice.

Purpose 4: Preparing Students to Lead Rich and Rewarding Personal Lives

We contend that schools have an obligation to think about how rich and rewarding the lives of their students will be. If we are to achieve progress for this purpose, however, we need not only teachers with a positive disposition toward the goal, but also a public that sees this as important. The "pursuit of happiness" is one of the basic promises made by the founders of the United States of America. Often, the areas that are deeply related to rich and rewarding personal lives are the ones cut in times of budget crisis, or de-emphasized because they are not easily measured. These often include the arts, physical education, and health education. Of course, learning the traditional academic subjects well—history, science, mathematics, literature—is also important for leading rich and rewarding personal lives.

For one thing, knowledge and understanding of the arts are critical to leading rich and rewarding personal lives. It is one thing to study Shakespeare, and another to study it in a way that is inviting and rewarding so that someday a student will actually choose to read or attend a performance of a Shakespearian drama because of the pleasure it can bring. Music especially is a part of the lives of

school children at all ages. But where and how are they exposed to the riches of music that have survived the challenges of time? Part of learning to lead rich and rewarding personal lives with respect to the arts involves learning how to be discerning and critical about what one experiences, yet another application of critical thinking. Greene (2001) has something to say about the arts in schools. In her book *The Blue Guitar*, she writes:

We are interested in education here, not in schooling. We are interested in openings, in unexplored possibilities, not in the predictable or the quantifiable, not in what is thought of as social control. For us, education signifies an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving. It signifies the nature of a special kind of reflectiveness and expressiveness, a reaching out for meanings, a learning to learn. . . . We do not regard aesthetic education as in any sense a fringe undertaking, a species of “frill.” We see it as integral to the development of persons—to the cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development. We see it as part of the human effort (so often forgotten today) to seek a greater coherence in the world. We see it as an effort to move individuals (working together, searching together) to seek a grounding for themselves, so that they may break through the “cotton wool” of dailyness and passivity and boredom and come awake to the colored sounding, problematic world. (p. 7)

For Greene, and for hopefully for all of us, leading rich and rewarding personal lives means breaking through passivity and boredom and seeing the world fully, and understanding the problems we face. Facing problems may not sound like happiness, but it is in the long run a way to have control over our lives, to see ourselves as having the potential to solve problems, and that is what we all hope for all our children.

Physical well-being and knowledge of health issues are obviously important in life, yet both health and physical education are often relegated to add-on status in schools. These are important

areas that belong in school not only for their immediate and long term impact, but because of the opportunities they offer for students to learn about cooperation, teamwork, fairness, resilience, goal setting, and respect for others. All of these are central to our position on preparing students to participate in a democratic society.

Development of the social and emotional well-being of students should also be emphasized in school. Schools have an obligation to think about life beyond schools and the potential quality of life our children will enjoy. This means attending to developing the social and emotional well-being of students. There is compelling evidence that when the well-being of students is not emphasized, there is a greater likelihood of them leaving school prematurely (Ruglis, 2009). Recent research suggests that longevity in school is the best correlate to good health. That is, the more school students experience, the more likely they are to be healthy, and, of course, those who leave school early suffer the consequences of leaving. These consequences are of great importance to our society and the individuals who suffer them, and include poor health, the likelihood of poverty, incarceration, and welfare dependency (Ruglis, 2009). Thus, helping all students achieve rich and rewarding personal lives is a matter of social justice.

Navigating the Politics and Policy of Education

What sort of progress can we expect in pursuing dispositions related to these purposes for education in a democracy? As we have heard for almost a decade at NNER meetings, the pressures of federal policy, especially No Child Left Behind, have put such a focus on preparation for tests so as to force out other purposes for which we educate, and there is evidence of the narrowing of the curriculum (McMurrer, 2007). Many expected that with a new President and a new administration this would change. Many educators in the NNER had in mind candidates for Secretary of Education who might move us in a direction more consonant with what we view as socially just and equitable schooling. Secretary Duncan was not one of them. In the first year of the Obama administration, the Department has used pressure for funding to shape state policy more

effectively than the Bush administration ever did, and the direction of these policies does not bode well for expanding the public purposes of education that we support. For example, the major federal funding initiative for states under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is Race to the Top. Within the R3T (as it is known) is an absolute criterion that there are no barriers to linking standardized test scores to decisions about reappointment and tenure of individual teachers. Such policy can only serve to further narrow the curriculum as teachers and administrators focus primarily on raising test scores at the expense of developing students' skills, knowledge and abilities necessary for promoting social justice and democracy.

It will then, take courage for administrators to push the wider purposes for schools that we advocate, and we are convinced that such a focus will ultimately improve test scores. We have one bit of evidence to support this idea and the outcome is instructive, encouraging, but also somewhat demoralizing. In New York City a longitudinal study, known as the Pathways Study, was undertaken to judge the impact of different paths to teaching on the outcomes of education including, and where possible, the outcomes on student test scores (Boyd, Wycoff, Michelli, et.al, 2006). College-based programs were compared to alternate pathways. In addition to this quantitative "value added" outcome, qualitative evidence was sought on the full range of reasons for why we educate. Results demonstrated that it was possible to raise student test scores AND achieve other important outcomes like preparing for democracy, enhancing imagination, and increasing the likelihood of a quality life. While these outcomes were both instructive and encouraging, we felt demoralized by the reaction from some policy makers. In personal communications, they suggested that if we had not distracted ourselves with these other "fluff" concepts like dispositions, test scores might be even higher. Many were not convinced and it was obvious that they had a completely different worldview from those of us who see social justice and democracy as important goals of public education.

These remain very difficult times. Our view of the public purposes of education within the NNER is not the majority view. Given our convictions, what are our choices? Should we give up on a broader view of why we educate including developing democratic skills and dispositions, increasing aesthetic understanding, and enhancing quality of life and focus instead on what is easily measured? Should we give up on our goals because they cannot always be measured? Must we provide evidence for these harder to measure goals? Or should we attempt to attend to both the current politically important standardized measures of achievement as well as our broader view?

We cannot, of course, give up on our view of public education—we believe that we have an obligation to have our voices heard and those voices are more meaningful when college and university educators and K-12 educators speak with a common voice. That is one of our strengths, but we must be sure that we have common meaning in our communications and encourage the NNER to continue to provide the kind of leadership development opportunities that clarify the meaning of our convictions. We believe it is possible to provide evidence for all aspects of our work and the NNER should make it a priority to help our settings develop such evidence. The work we present here is one effort is to provide a way to assess dispositions through observable actions. High-level academic learning and learning that enhances democracy and the quality of life are not mutually exclusive, but in fact reinforce each other. Our focus on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions current and future educators need is an imperative. We should always remember Albert Einstein’s observation that “Everything that counts can be counted and not everything we count, counts.” No other group of public schools and colleges are better positioned to have an impact on expanding a national commitment to education in a democracy than members of the National Network for Educational Renewal, but we must have the courage to sustain our work.

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Tina Jacobowitz is a Professor of Education and Chair of the Department of Early childhood, Elementary and Literacy Education at Montclair State University.

Nicholas M. Michelli is Presidential Professor teaching educational policy in the Ph.D. program in Urban Education at CUNY's Graduate Center and previously served as dean at Montclair State University and City University of New York for 25 years.

Lori Marulli recently completed her MAT in Elementary and Teacher of Students with Disabilities from Montclair State University and will begin her first year as a 3rd/4th grade Language Learning Disabilities Teacher at Milltown School in Bridgewater-Raritan Regional School District in New Jersey.