

Our Obligations as Educators in a Democracy:

Transforming the NNER into an Activist Organization

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Abstract

The authors of this article are five Ph.D. graduates from an NNER institution and two faculty members from two NNER institutions. We have met every week for the past three years contemplating our obligations as educators who are concerned about the future of American public education. American public education is in more serious jeopardy than at any time in our memories, and perhaps history, as efforts to undermine its existence and purpose abound. University-based teacher education is also under siege, with challenges being made by expanding agencies who have the authority to certify teachers, including charter schools. The role of program accreditation and the locus of accreditation are again under challenge and measurement of learning outcomes as a value-added measure is an increasingly difficult requirement. We believe, and argue here, that it is imperative for education to include: becoming critical participants in a democratic and socially just society, demanding equity for all students, educating for quality of life, and becoming public activists for change. This obligation falls to individuals and organizations concerned about the current state of education and who support a different discourse about education, such as the National Network for Educational Renewal, to take a public, activist role to promote civil discourse that supersedes the dominant discourse about education.

The National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) was founded by John Goodlad and his colleagues in 1992 to implement a moral agenda for education in a democracy. The overarching goal of the NNER was to promote partnerships among public schools and

universities that had teacher education programs (Goodlad, 1994). His vision was that all those responsible for the preparation of teachers – faculty and administrators of public schools and both education and arts and sciences faculty and administrators of universities – could work together to fulfill the democratic mission of public schooling (Goodlad, 1994). In this paper, we examine what we see as necessary for the National Network for Educational Renewal to become more of an activist organization seeking change. To do this we examine the NNER’s moral agenda – the Agenda for Education in a Democracy - as it stands, we examine change strategies as guides to large scale change, and we propose specific changes to the moral agenda to reflect our current thinking and to have a wider impact on schools and society.

The authors of this article came together around a shared passion: to make explicit the public purposes of education in a democracy and to suggest ways to achieve these purposes. Our group consists of two faculty members from two NNER institutions and five Ph.D. graduates of the City University of New York Graduate Center, all of whom have been active in the NNER. One has been a dean at two NNER settings, one of which was Montclair State University, a setting that was one of the original eight admitted to the NNER at its inception. He also served as first Chair of the Governing Council which is the NNER policymaking body, as well as the Executive Committee, which can act on important matters between Governing Council meetings. The second faculty member served as first director of The Agenda for Education in a Democracy at Montclair State University, the body that managed the NNER activities at Montclair, and Chairperson of one of the largest departments at the university. In 1992, she participated in the first cohort of the Leadership Associates, led by John Goodlad and subsequently lead Leadership Associate meetings nationally and locally.

The other authors, all former students of the dean, regularly attend and present at NNER meetings. They represent a faculty member at Bronx Community College, an administrator in CUNY’s central office, a program officer at the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the director of a funded project at CUNY working in schools, and an employee of Children’s Aid who works with community schools in New York City. The five members of the team at The Graduate Center started as a support group for students writing dissertations and articles and has met virtually every week for the past three years. When those in the group finished their Ph.D.’s they continued meeting, contemplating

our obligations as educators who are concerned about the future of American public education and committed to promoting the role of education in a democracy. As a result of these activities and work experiences, as well as a deep review of relevant literature, we conclude that the NNER needs to reexamine its agenda and become more of an activist group in order to survive as an organization that exists to enhance public education in the United States.

We believe that, in general, American public education is in more serious jeopardy than at any time in our memories, and perhaps in history, as efforts to undermine its existence and purpose abound. Proposals for charter schools and funded school choice, including religious schools, are emerging at all levels, led by the Secretary of Education and the President. University-based teacher education is also under siege, with several challenges being made. In one case, a private university with a focus on certifying charter schools has appeared and is accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). In another instance, which was overturned by the Board of Regents after serious lobbying by NY teacher educators, was an effort to have the Charter School Board for the State University of New York (SUNY) assert their right to certify beginning teachers in their charter schools. Along with certification, the role of program accreditation and the locus of accreditation are again under challenge as yet another accrediting body emerges. Additionally, pressure for measurement of learning outcomes as a value-added measure is becoming an increasingly difficult requirement in certification.

We argue here that it is time for those of us who pursue a view of education that includes preparing students to become critical participants in a democratic and socially just society, demanding equity for all students, educating for quality of life, and becoming public activists for change, to take action. This obligation falls to all public educators and organizations concerned about education today and who support a different discourse about education. The NNER must take a public, activist role to promote civil discourse that goes beyond the dominant discourse about education if it is to remain relevant in today's current educational climate.

We contend that public education as it now stands is not, for the most part, achieving the ends we need in a democratic society. In fact, its role in a democracy is not even part of the dominant discourse on education. Hence, we are changing one of the driving questions from "Why do we educate in a democracy?" to "Why should we educate in

a democracy?” These are very different questions. One asks for more of a description of what we do, while the other asks what needs to change. One could lead to a description of educational goals, while the other leads us to reimagining education. Our goal, then, is to help the public, educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders rethink and reimagine education—its purposes and hoped for outcomes.

To be clear, we fully endorse the mission, which includes the moral imperative of the NNER outlined on the NNER web page and elsewhere. These are:

1. Foster in the nation’s young the skills, dispositions and knowledge necessary for effective participation in a political democracy.
2. Ensure that the young have access to those understandings and skills required for satisfying and responsible lives.
3. Develop educators who nurture the learning and well-being of every student.
4. Ensure educators’ competence in and commitment to serving as stewards of schools. (National Network for Education Renewal, 2018)

However, we are convinced that they do not go far enough for our times and need to be interpreted differently. In addition, we must recognize how much of a minority we are in the view of education we represent. These are not the purposes most policy makers or even many educators and parents would espouse. These are not the foci of teacher education in most programs. One would have to conclude that, despite changes suggested in Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the purpose still seems to be preparing students to pass tests designed by others. We have looked at state plans for implementing ESSA, both submitted and accepted, and find the pressure for testing to remain strong. In fact, it might appear to some that the pressure is lessened since the department moved from “strong evidence” which was based on test scores to evidence decided upon by states. We see the changes giving more discretion to the state and US Department of Education.

As a specific example, in The Federal Register, the department abandons the criterion of “strong theory” and substitutes “demonstrates a rationale.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Then, instead of requiring that quasi-experimental designs meet the department’s standards for use, the change allows them to be considered “promising evidence” with no other criteria specified. The combination of these factors is what led us to the conclusion that we must become much more vigilant and have more opportunity to challenge state positions

when they claim state positions are required by ESSA. Therefore, the NNER must be active on the state and national scene, as we propose and promote change, and begin the dialogue with all those who need to be involved. We argue that this change will give us much more power as an organization, especially with the state.

This is a very different large-scale change strategy than we as an organization have ever been engaged in. To help in that process, we have adopted and adapted the theoretical stances regarding the change process in democracy of Michael Fullan, Peter Senge, and George Lakoff, along with John Goodlad's to guide this work. We also include the theories and ideas of Maxine Greene with her focus on enhancing the quality of life.

Overall Strategy

Historically, the NNER was focused on developing and nurturing school/university partnerships following the guiding principles of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy. Over the years, we incorporated more work on social justice, diversity and inclusion. Members enjoyed having colleagues all around the country with whom they could share their challenges and successes related to their settings. Actions related to public school advocacy and the implementation of our moral agenda were carried out primarily by the individual settings. We believe that given the current attack on public education both on the national and state levels, the NNER must become more political and take on the role of an activist organization. The purpose of this article is to propose several strategies to achieve this.

One reflection of the state of American education is the dominant discourse that characterizes the work of public schools. We think it is fair to say that the discourse is largely negative – claims are made that schools are failing and teachers are failing, especially for children in poverty. The solutions posited by those who make these claims is that education should focus on career and college readiness. While we agree that these goals are important, we see them as limited, not nearly achieving what is really needed in education. (One concern is that these goals can lead to early tracking of students deemed unsuitable for college.) We believe that education should focus on important life changing goals that go beyond career and college readiness. We need to reimagine education and get to why we should be educating in a democracy.

We believe that one of the central roles of education in a democracy

is to analyze and confront the ways in which we treat one another, not only in our personal interactions, but also in the ways we view and treat groups different from ourselves. Schools and teachers must address the deep-seated perspectives that lead to xenophobia, homophobia, racism, classism gender discrimination and more. Inappropriate behaviors should not be tolerated in a democracy and we must intervene to seek change.

While most teachers learn about classroom management that deals with common behavioral problems, they are often not prepared to confront those behaviors that are rooted in discrimination towards others. So we ask, what should educators do when they confront such behaviors among their students that are rooted in racism and other forms of discrimination? How can we ensure that teachers themselves have examined their own prejudices and behaviors towards students and colleagues different from themselves? How do we prepare teachers to work with parents and their communities around issues of discrimination?

Toward these ends, we have undertaken professional development in schools, at colleges, at conferences, with the explicit goal of examining what education should accomplish. We assert that learning to recognize and deal with discrimination should not be left to individuals, but must be overtly and intentionally integrated into the school curriculum. Such work should not be left to teachers alone, but must include parents, students, colleagues, policy makers and the public in general.

As a result of our meetings and discussions, we decided to write a comprehensive book about education in a democracy, entitled *Reimagining American Education to Serve All our Children: Why should we educate in a democracy?* The book will address the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in preparing teachers for public schools. It is our intention to lay out in this comprehensive book the theories, ideas, motivations, and goals that, in our view, belong in public education in a political and social democracy. We have signed a contract with Routledge, with an agreement to release the book in time for the 2020 elections. We hope to bring our perspective to presidential and local politics and use the book to guide discussions in a variety of venues.

Finally, we have committed to working with community groups, students and K-12 faculty, to encourage them to be involved in politics and use their moral beliefs about education as a guide to seeking

out, selecting and supporting candidates consistent with our moral agenda. Several of us are deeply involved in local politics to promote and support candidates for local and national elections, including the election of one of us to the county committee of a political party to help shape the agenda at that level.

We must also note that many of the policy makers we must influence are not elected. These include members of state boards and local boards in many communities. They are beholden to elected officials, whose policy positions we must examine. Our hope is to inform both educators and students that they have power to influence policy makers, through voting and political activity. But in order to accomplish this, they must be informed and knowledgeable about the issues. We hope to provide guidance in this regard in our book.

Strategies for Change Based on Theory

We are proposing working towards large scale change, and to do so requires that we examine the models for achieving change that are most useful. We will summarize a few of these models and key elements to illustrate how they can be used and how we use them.

First, Peter Senge, who is often identified as a “systems scientist”, puts forward some critical ideas. His best-known work is *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Senge, 1990). He followed this with an adaptation for educators and parents, *Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators Parents and Everyone Who Cares about Education* (Senge, 2000). The work the NNER engages in is full of contentious concepts—ideas that are very complex and have different meanings for different individuals (Gallie, 1956).

Senge gives us an important key for our work, especially for dealing with contested concepts—the idea of a shared vision. Organizations that seek change must have a shared vision; members must come to a consensus about the key concepts relevant to their goals. For the NNER this means taking the time to reach consensus within the “tripartite,” the three groups most involved in teacher preparation. The tripartite includes faculty and administrators from the public schools and university-based faculty and administrators from both the arts and sciences and education. It is unfortunate that over the past few years the number of arts and science faculty participating in the NNER has decreased considerably. Because these individuals play such an important role in preparing teachers, it is critically important for them

to be brought back into the conversation. It is our hope that the current threats to democracy affecting all of us in this current political climate will serve as an impetus for individuals from the arts and science to become involved in revising our shared vision for educating in and for democracy.

Another important idea that has to be considered in change of this kind comes from George Lakoff, a linguist who studies metaphors, especially political metaphors and their meanings. Lakoff concludes that the difficult concepts we work with often have multiple meanings depending on our “world view.” In his work, he has examined how conservatives and liberals view the world differently. In politics, we often see things as right or wrong—right if they are our views, and wrong if someone disagrees with them. Lakoff helps us understand that there is sometimes legitimacy in the alternative views of these difficult, contested concepts. His work allows for an understanding of the differences in worldview of conservatives and liberals and helps understand their positions on various issues, including education, abortion, and welfare (Lakoff, 2002; 2017). Understanding Lakoff’s work, especially at the policy level, provides perspectives on why change is sometimes so hard. Worldviews are deeply ingrained and difficult to change. But even if we cannot change them completely, it helps us to avoid saying there are simple “right” and “wrong” answers to hard questions. Usually the other side is as certain they are right as we are. Of course, in examining alternative worldviews, we should not compromise our own moral commitments. In this case, we can’t accept a worldview that is abhorrent to democracy.

Michael Fullan has emerged as one of the most important experts on change and the issues that impede it or enhance the possibilities of success. Among other things, Fullan examines the drivers of change that are used, both effective drivers and ineffective drivers. The ineffective drivers sound very much like what happens in education generally. For example, he sees, as ineffective drivers:

1. Accountability: using test results and teacher appraisal to reward or punish teachers and schools as opposed to capacity building.
2. Individual teacher and leadership quality: focusing on individual rather than group solutions.
3. Technology: investing in and assuming the digital world will carry the day to enhance learning rather than teacher abilities.
4. Fragmented strategies vs. integrated strategies: rather than developing integrated and systemic strategies. (Fullan, 1993)

As change agents, according to Fullan, we must be clear about our moral imperative—what do we think is most important in improving education in and for democracy? Then we have to ask how closely our moral imperative is linked to the moral imperative currently driving education. For the NNER, the moral imperative has been clear and is encapsulated in the four moral dimensions of our mission delineated above. Next, we have to decide what we will accept as evidence that we are making progress towards our moral imperative. We know that in the process of this very hard work, we may have to change some aspects of our moral imperative because we discover different meanings. We must be willing to do this and track evidence of progress. We will suggest some changes to the NNER moral imperative.

Finally, we turn to Maxine Greene, one of our most important philosophers of aesthetics and morality. Greene, in her book *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*, gives us important guiding principles for our work on change. For example:

1. Students must understand the deep connection to, and responsibility for, not only their own individual experience but also for other human beings who share this world.
2. Freedom does not mean absence of responsibility. One can only be free when one accepts responsibility for his/her experience in the world.
3. Knowledge is anything that helps us to know ourselves and the world in which we live.
4. Knowledge comes from beliefs that have been subjected to reflection.
5. The ultimate purpose of education is to help students and their teachers create meaning in their lives. Teachers should challenge the taken for granted and the given.
6. And, in line with Dewey's (1966) views, democracy is a way of life, not just a way of governing. (Greene, 1995)

Why should we educate in a democracy?

These theories of change, along with our consideration of the politics of education, the work of John Goodlad and the NNER, has led us to an expanded view of the answer as to why we should educate in a democracy. It is expanded when compared with the four moral imperatives of the mission of the NNER and suggests a need for

broader moral imperatives. Here are the principles we have developed, propose, and work towards in everything the NNER does:

1. Our conception of knowledge: Providing access to and understanding of knowledge to all students, including the sources of knowledge, the disciplinary bases for knowledge, and the ability to think critically about knowledge. A major difference here is that we need to think differently about “knowledge”. One key element, just to provide an illustration, is helping students understand that knowledge is the product of human beings. Some “higher authority” does not give it to us, nor does it exist in a vacuum—it is a function of society. Students must realize that they have that ability to “create” knowledge—explanations for phenomena, solving complex problems, analyzing social contexts and more. We argue that knowing this is an empowering condition for students.
2. Jean Anyon’s work suggests that the wealthier a district, the more likely it is that teachers believe and expect that students can create knowledge (Anyon, 1979). Furthermore, we will argue and demonstrate that knowledge is not fixed but shifts as new understandings emerge. It also means approaching knowledge from a critical perspective. We expand on the meaning of critical thinking in all classrooms. We use the United Nations goals for sustainability as examples of “knowledge” running counter to current practices and to illustrate what education to enhance the quality of life might look like. The goals can give guidance to curriculum. They include working towards no poverty, zero hunger, good health, peace, and justice, among others. Imagine if our children understood what is behind each of these (United Nations, 2018.)
3. Our conception of preparing for college and career: Enabling students to take advantage of life’s chances as they move forward, including developing imagination that will enable their access to broader life choices. A key difference from the traditional view of preparing for college and career, that is, to acquire existing knowledge, is viewing education as providing access to life’s possibilities. There is a critical difference in our thinking. It is one thing to provide access to life’s possibilities, and it is a very different thing to know how to take advantage of them. The education process must involve developing children’s awareness of what these possibilities are. As the philosopher Maxine Greene (2001) posited, “We cannot become what we cannot imagine” (p. 47). We must

study how education can foster and extend imagination—an area where there is significant new research including the work of Eric Lieu and Scott Noppe-Brandon (2009). Our work with imagination must consider Greene’s argument by helping students understand and know the options they have in life. Students in poverty may never be familiar with or learn how to pursue professional careers, such as becoming lawyers or doctors. Without this knowledge, they cannot imagine such possibilities.

4. Our conception of education for quality of life: We must assure that education includes elements beyond knowledge to enable effective career and college choices. Education must also enable a rich and rewarding quality of personal life for ourselves and others. For example:
 - The visual arts and music must be sustained in the curriculum as important academic subjects, designed to enhance imagination.
 - Physical education and health education, which are often minimized, are equally important for a healthy democratic society and should be given adequate space in the curriculum.
5. While this also relates to our next point about democracy and social justice, we must work assiduously to address discrimination and repression by learning about the sources of bias across a broad spectrum—racism, xenophobia, sexism, and more. Educators must be equipped to respond to bias when they see it and become upstanders rather than bystanders. We know from our experience how inspiring and attractive it is to educators to engage in efforts to combat these conditions.
6. Our conception of the role of education in sustaining democracy and social justice: It is essential that students are prepared to live in, and contribute to, a socially just democratic society as critical participants. To do this, we must engage in a careful consideration of what democracy and social justice can mean for education. As noted, both are clearly contentious concepts and require work towards a shared vision. In considering democracy, we engage in what it means to act in a democratic way with our fellow human beings. Dewey (1966) argued, and so do we, that democracy is as much about human interaction as it is about government. We need to show how every teacher can extend the ability of students to listen, show empathy, argue for positions, give valid reasons for their positions, and be open to compromise. This means

that everyone can act as a member of a democratic society and citizenship status for such a role is irrelevant. It is worth quoting directly from Dewey (1966): A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 1966, p.87) Removing barriers of race and class are explicit in how Dewey defines democracy.

7. For social justice, an even more difficult and contentious idea, we try to use the idea of social justice as living one's life of non-repression and nondiscrimination in all forms. It is imperative that before teaching this to others, teachers must develop sensitivity to the presence of these repressive and discriminatory factors in themselves so that they can be self-correcting. Only then will they be able to model and teach these attitudes and values to their students. As stated earlier, direct attention to inappropriate behavior stemming from repression and discrimination must be an intentional part of the curriculum. The political scientist Amy Guttmann (1987) has written about the ideas of "nonrepression and nondiscrimination" as cornerstones of a socially just democratic society and system of education (Guttmann, 1987, p. 14).

Finally, we want to reinforce the idea that this work towards democracy and social justice as we conceive it is something in which every teacher can and should engage. It is not the sole responsibility of social studies teachers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

How do we put this all together? We must analyze our change efforts in the context of what we know about large scale change to maximize our impact. This means we have to be clear among ourselves regarding our moral imperative and we must work toward a shared vision of all the contentious concepts we support. We must understand that to support democratic life we must adopt Dewey, Guttmann and Greene's ideas about democracy. Following Lakoff, we must be aware that worldviews are powerful internal mechanisms. Given this, we must

avoid suggesting that we are “right” and everyone else is “wrong,” even if we believe that is the case! Essentially, that means having respect for all views that do not violate our moral perspective, and we must speak out when they do.

The NNER should develop materials and support for use in local settings to enable the skills and knowledge we require. Specifically, these relate to:

1. Developing skill in engaging in democratic discussion that includes listening with care, having empathy, providing reasons for positions stated, fostering input from all, being open to compromise, having a willingness to self-correct, and assessing outcomes of discussions. This approach can be the basis for critical thinking and applied broadly to democracy both as a way of life and in making life decisions, including those related to voting and the conduct of government (Lipman, 2003).
2. Engaging in discussions about the critical concepts. What are the ideas that should be discussed? How do we engage in democratic discussions? What do we do when ideas conflicting with our moral perspectives are introduced?
3. Developing understanding of what a “shared vision” is and keeping it open as new individuals, settings and organizations join groups. A shared vision cannot be imposed on a group as it changes. Additional discussion is always required when the group changes or when individuals find their perspective to be changing. We encourage the NNER to revisit its mission every few years. This is not only for new members but for those who have been members for a long time. We all need to revisit and revitalize our thinking about what the NNER stands for.
4. Examining the new research on imagination to incorporate it as a systematic goal to expand the life choices students have.
5. Understanding change and the ideas of the leading theorists of change, especially regarding engaging in change in a democratic society. This includes opening ideas for change in education that may not be on the agenda of some of the groups with whom we work, such as fostering imagination, thinking about quality of life broadly defined, and other ideas that go beyond “career and college readiness.”
6. Considering the process of influencing policymakers. How do we get involved in working with policymakers? What can be expected? What are the known methods that work? We need to encourage as many members of NNER settings to become

politically and socially active.

7. Demonstrate political activity ourselves and share experiences with others. If we are to influence policy makers, our colleagues must see themselves as “constituents” who stand as the best chance for positive influence. Bring back the journalism group initiated by Dick Clark years ago, so that members can feel confident in writing op ed pieces and letters to editors of local and national newspapers.
8. To the extent possible, and the possibilities vary by state, have discussions with high school students reaching voting age to encourage them to register to vote. Help them to consider the issues. This is not always possible. We know of one large, wealthy school district, which will remain nameless, that virtually prohibits discussion of current issues for fear of offending board members or the public. We think that is becoming more common than we might guess, and it needs to be confronted.
9. Of course, we must encourage all educators to register to vote if they have not done so.
10. We must be sensitive to the issues that are increasingly affecting students, including school climate and gun safety. We have to consider the contexts in which we work to decide how best to do this. Currently, we are confronted with a Secretary of Education who, in her confirmation hearing, asserted that we keep guns in schools to protect against grizzly bears who might encroach on school property. This is one example of what we are up against in the current political climate. (Carroll, 2017) We must be cognizant of new ideas and new approaches as they emerge, for example, those of Chris Edmin on urban education. Edmin is a graduate of The Ph.D. Program in Urban Education at CUNY, and has been widely recognized for his work on reality pedagogy, an approach to using knowledge of students and using their reality for planning instruction (Edmin, 2017).

Besides our work, there is other hopeful work. Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE) is a group of Deans that takes strong public positions on equity. The NNER is affiliated with EDJE. There are also examples of college programs closely tied to helping teachers work closely with communities at the University of Washington and Ball State University (Cochran-Smith, 2018). The University of New Mexico has made great strides in its work with local communities

as well. Finally, in New York, the New York Coalition of Radical Educators (NYCore), a grassroots organization, holds regular meetings with teachers to discuss needed social change, consonant with our view of what education in a democracy should look like.

If the NNER is to remain relevant as an educational organization designed to promote democracy and social justice, we need to become an activist group in ways we have written about in this article. Our small group collaboration, such as this article, exemplifies the requirements for change presented by Robinson and Aronica (2015) in their book, *Creative Schools*. We offer a critique, vision, and theory of change and believe that our combined voices can make real change possible. We hope this article will instigate further conversation of additional actions we can take as an organization that align with our mission. It will not be easy, but if we do not seize this opportunity, we will not be fulfilling our moral imperative so thoughtfully created and promoted by John Goodlad and enhanced and expanded upon by the many individuals involved in the organization over the past thirty years. We have a moral obligation to make our work and voices heard, and the time for our input has never been more critical.

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