The Public Purposes of Schooling in the Age of Coronavirus and Beyond

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Abstract
Though public education generally receives a great deal of support in the U.S., a gap persists in the public understanding of the contested nature and competing aims of schooling. Some of these have existed since the beginning of the modern system of public education in the United States, but current debates about P-12 schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic have brought forth new tensions. This article presents ten such public purposes of schooling, with specific examples, in order to surface these competing aims of schooling as important decisions are made during and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Keywords: *educating in a pandemic, purposes of school*

As I write this, many communities around the United States continue to struggle with multiple dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the dilemmas surrounding schools and students are some of the most difficult to resolve. If the only consideration were halting the spread of the disease, closing school facilities and educating every student remotely would undoubtedly be the most reasonable approach. However, from a broader public health perspective that recognizes public schools as the place where many children receive social services, shutting school buildings means that some students do not have their critical needs met. A similar conflict arises in the push to reopen schools, in that the same marginalized students who are least likely to have access to the secure housing, technology, and network access needed for doing school remotely are also at highest risk of having their health, and that of their families, impacted by COVID-19 (Boserup et al., 2020; Gaynor & Wilson, 2020).

These competing aims are in tension right now in school districts all over the country, but the larger point I wish to make here is that there are even more public purposes of schooling to consider, many of which have been in opposition since the creation of public education in the United States over 150 years ago. Though public education generally receives a great deal of support (e.g. Phi Delta Kappan, 2020), a gap persists in the public understanding of the contested nature and competing aims of schooling. The purpose of this article is to clearly enumerate these purposes to better understand how and why they have remained in tension for so long.

I have listed ten such public purposes of education here, though of course there is no definitive list. I have developed these categories over the past eight years teaching a course at Montclair State University in New Jersey titled, "The Public Purposes of Education," which is based on John Goodlad's work and the Agenda for Education in a Democracy (Goodlad et al., 2004). Along with this list, I have provided some examples of features of schooling that align with each purpose. I think of these purposes like multiple streams feeding into a larger river, a metaphor proposed by education historian Herbert Kliebard (1995) as an alternative to that of the pendulum swing of curriculum. Over the history of U.S. schools, one can see how some of these streams have changed from trickling rivulets, to rushing currents, and back again to gentle creeks. Pick any school issue that is a source of contemporary debate, and you will find two or more of these goals in tension with one another:

1. Academic: Schools maintain academic traditions of intellectual development

This is what most people think about when the topic of schooling arises. School is not only an important place where knowledge and skills are acquired, but also where students are expected to develop the intellectual capabilities to deploy these hard-won secrets of nature and humanity to current concerns and pressing problems of the future.

Much of the conversation around pivoting to online education during the coronavirus pandemic is dominated by academic goals of schooling, as exemplified by concern about "learning loss," (Ewing, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). For those who conceive of learning

simply as knowledge acquisition, moving schooling to a virtual or online format is seen as a way to just change the delivery mechanism.

Examples: literacy and mathematics instruction, standardized testing, textbooks and online resources, focus on college admission

2. Child welfare: Schools ensure children have their physical and emotional needs met, and remain free from abuse and neglect

Schools form part of the largest social safety net in the U.S. and remain a place where many students still get a significant amount of their daily nutrition. They are also a place where (uniformly overworked) counselors, social workers, and psychologists are able to interact with students and address a wide range of needs, including crisis and trauma.

A related aspect of child welfare is adequately meeting educational needs related to student disabilities. In the U.S., the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) helps scaffold the services schools are meant to provide to students that mitigate barriers to learning and prevent the exclusion of students from educational programming.

Examples: crisis counselors, school lunch and breakfast programs, anti-bullying efforts, sports physicals, individual educational plans (IEPs), school nurses, metal detectors, school security officers

3. Academic: Schools maintain academic traditions of intellectual development

Schools support multiple forms of child development, including language, physical health, social engagement, and cognitive development. In addition to what they learn at home, schools are where children learn information about nutrition and physical health that will last a lifetime. Just like schools might be the only place where some students can be sure to get a daily meal, they may also provide the only time for students to engage in sustained physical activity — there is a reason physical education class continues to exist in the digital age. Schools also help to support language development, both for students' first language as well as for those students learning English as an additional language.

Socially, schools are also a place where children can build safe and healthy interactions with adults and peers. Crucially, this involves play, and schools support play by ensuring it occurs in relatively bounded and safe environments.

Examples: provision of a supportive and structured environment, playgrounds and recess, English as a second language support, scoliosis screenings, development of self-regulation skills, restorative justice circles

4. Economic preparation: Schools provide training that leads to productivity in business and industry

Most people seem to understand that schools aim to prepare people to enter the world of work. Some ways to do this align with the academic aims of schooling, but the world of business has been quite clear that they value other specific skills as well, such as creativity, collaboration, and technological proficiency (Larson & Miller, 2011).

Schools also directly support entry into the workforce through technical training, vocational education, and internship programs for upper-level high school students.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the critique of public schools that highlights how schooling replicates the structure of a factory and governs students' bodies (Kliebard, 1995; Popkewitz, 1998; Sleeter, 2015). From this perspective, schooling is a means to prepare students for experiencing the world of work through daily habituation to systems of occupational management.

Examples: keyboarding class, senior internships, career days, vocational education, school bells, permission to use the restroom

5. Workforce support: Schools serve a critical function in the modern economy

As safe places where children can be during the day, schools essentially provide daycare for children, which allows parents and guardians to be more productive members of the workforce. Angus and Mirel (1993) termed this the "custodial" function of schools. Many schools also offer before and after school care for this reason. In a time when many parents are working from home while simultaneously caring for children who attend school remotely, this purpose of schooling is keenly felt.

Additionally, schools help to keep unemployment rates lower by removing teenagers from the full-time workforce for most of the year, except in the summer when they are needed. Further, schools provide jobs for many in the middle-class: the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) estimated that over 3.5 million people are categorized as educators, and this number does not include all of the people who provide services like cooking, cleaning, and maintenance for schools. It also does not include the vast number of workers in other fields such as those who produce educational materials like textbooks and tests, or people like me in higher education whose work centers on schools and learning.

Examples: compulsory schooling; summer vacation; the workforce of Pearson, ETS, and the College Board; public approval of school budgets in elections

6. Sustaining culture: Schools sustain cultural identities and traditions, and aim to transmit them from one generation to the next

Cultural traditions embody aspects of what is considered "normal" and "right" within any social system, and schools are no exception (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Spindler, 1963). For some people, this cultural function of schooling is nearly invisible, while for others it is a dominating feature that must be navigated constantly. Simply *going to school* is a strong cultural tradition in the modern era and is likely one reason some communities have resisted remote schooling so strongly.

In some communities, these cultural traditions involve the celebration of holidays (and the absence of celebration of others), support for team sports, and the nature of the subject matter that constitutes the curriculum. Educators and community members on both sides of a contemporary debate — say, a robust sex education vs. an "abstinence-only" curriculum — can frame the issue as consistent (or not) with local culture. Such cultural traditions are often the source of community support for schools: people want them to happen. This is why there is often such a backlash when commonly accepted elements of schooling are curtailed because another purpose of schooling wins out.

Schools can also work to sustain the culture of their students. For example, some schools and educators choose to make a robust effort

to highlight the contributions of African Americans during Black History Month, knowing that doing so is important for students of color in a society in which racial identity still matters a great deal.

Finally, school itself has given rise to cultural traditions, such as dances and science fairs, which themselves are maintained from year to year and become part of the fabric of culture.

Examples: Spelling bees, the historically problematic yet enduring story of Thanksgiving (Bigelow & Peterson, 1998), school prayer, graduation ceremonies, multicultural education, singing the "Black national anthem," lights for football fields, bringing in cupcakes on birthdays, Halloween parades, musical selections for school concerts

7. Democracy and citizenship: Schools foster social cohesion by developing students' identities as U.S. citizens with an understanding of democracy

One of the original purposes of schooling in the United States was to assimilate the large number of immigrants into the fabric of the country, and a key element of this approach was to encourage people to consider themselves Americans.

The most obvious elements of this aim of schooling may be found in outward displays of patriotism, practices such as voting, and the curriculum of U.S. history and civics classes. Organizations adjacent to the school, such as booster clubs and teachers' unions, may also foster this goal in the wider community.

Recent activism by young people in the wake of school shootings has leaned heavily into this purpose of schooling. These student activists have formed diverse and intersectional coalitions to make a citizenship argument based in human rights and public safety (Bent, 2019, 2020).

Examples: The Pledge of Allegiance, Junior ROTC, national anthem at sporting events, student government, elections for homecoming "royalty," Parent-Teacher Associations

8. Moral and ethical training: Schools prepare students to make value-based judgments

This aim of schooling is likely far more present and visible in private and religious schools, but public schools are also places where children are expected to learn to distinguish between right and wrong,

and perhaps more importantly, to begin making decisions that reflect such judgments. Even in the youngest grades, teachers can work with students to help them develop a sense of empathy, an essential element of moral reasoning.

In some schools, teachers at every grade level expend a great deal of effort in developing students' sense of internal motivation and locus of control. In others, reward and punishment still drive moral and ethical training, which may serve other goals of schooling well, but likely does little to develop the necessary foundation for decision-making (Kohn, 1993).

Sometimes this moral training is deliberate, particularly when children have the opportunity to decide what is fair in a given situation, or during explicit discussions of bioethics (the scenarios are all too real now). A smashed-up car on the front lawn of many U.S. schools around senior prom week is a none-too-subtle reminder to students of the consequences of poor choices for themselves and others.

Other times, this training is hidden, and perhaps counter to what the adults in a school might suppose. For example, there may be a broad ethical consensus in the school that cheating on tests is bad, and adults can send this message many ways. However, a student may decide through their own moral reasoning that cheating on tests is a reasonable and justified response to the academic pressure they experience (Jensen et al., 2002).

Examples: conflict resolution, dress codes, alcohol education in health classes, character education, peer leadership programs, student of the month awards, in-school suspension

9. Social reproduction: Schools ensure society continues to run by maintaining societal structures such as language, socioeconomic class, and political power

The defining feature of all of the goals on this list is that they have a constituency; that is, they are there because part of the public wants them to be there. When people in a school decide to spend money on a new scoreboard for the football field instead of an additional teacher for the growing population of English language learners, they are making a decision that benefits one group at the expense of another. Standardized testing has its critics, but one of the reasons it

likely persists is that it identifies students who benefit most from the current social arrangement as academically superior. If this seems to be too bold of a claim, consider what the public reaction might be if a "failing" school district figured out an amazing magic formula for education and started producing large numbers of extraordinary graduates who were competitive for limited spots in prestigious colleges. I am realistic enough to recognize such achievement would be more likely to be doubted than lauded.

Academic labeling is probably the clearest observable example of this social reproduction (Oakes, 2005). Some students are "at-risk" from the moment they set foot in a kindergarten class (Rist, 1970), while others are never at risk of being at-risk. Some students are designated as honor students, while others take classes with the label "college prep," an Orwellian turn of phrase if ever there was one. My work takes me into many educational settings, and I have rarely seen an Advanced Placement class that reflects the racial diversity of the school.

In the U.S., schools are largely funded by local property tax revenue supplemented by state governments, and though some states have made great strides to equalize funding, access to educational opportunities remains a function of where students reside (Baker, 2018). Better funded schools have more varied curricular offerings, better facilities, and can attract more highly qualified teachers with better wages. Book fairs and school pictures are great, but they inevitably put pressure on families who struggle financially when the cost is passed on to them. And (at least in pre-pandemic times) whose classes got to go to Italy over spring break?

Schools unfailingly reproduce the social structure in which they are embedded. If they did not, the substantial and significant differences among various groups in educational outcomes would instead simply be statistical noise.

Examples: gifted and talented programs, fees for participation in sports, access to technology, charges for field trips, external school foundations, student parking lots, school-based police officers

10. Social transformation: Schools prepare students to resist social inequalities and provide them with tools to work toward justice

In a very broad sense, the long fight for educational equality both before and after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954 that struck down school segregation is an example of this aim. Whenever schools have been a source of social inequality, a constituency has worked to transform the schools themselves (and, let it not be forgotten, a group that resisted the transformation). Students have always been a part of this effort.

These battles for social transformation have included fighting for the rights of students with disabilities to be included in classrooms with their non-disabled classmates, same-sex or "mixed-race" couples to attend prom together, or immigrant students to learn academic subjects in a language other than English. Sometimes this social transformation occurs in the curriculum. It is no longer acceptable for classroom libraries and textbooks to consist of stories for, by, and about only White people. Art, music, science, and history have all had to reckon with the legacy of racism and colonialism in their subject matter with varying degrees of success.

Other times this social transformation happens within the community of the school. Bullying and sexual harassment, behavior that is now largely sanctioned, were once considered to be an inevitable characteristic of schooling. Schools have been under regular pressure over the past decade to provide healthier school lunches, as part of a growing movement to rethink food policy nationwide. Of course, some social transformations are rejected or only find purchase in a small number of places, such as efforts to allow teachers to carry concealed firearms or limit the teaching of evolution.

For many who seek to ensure schools do right by students who are marginalized in society, this purpose is essential because it embraces the critical perspectives needed for sociopolitical change and justice (Paris, 2012). This aim of schooling is one reason I became an educator in the first place. It is also why so many are working hard to ensure schools do not return to normal after the pandemic, because "normal" was not working for many students in the first place (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Examples: gay-straight alliance clubs, climate change education, restorative justice circles, culturally relevant pedagogy, de-tracked schools, participatory action research, gender inclusive restrooms, Black Lives Matter in Schools

In examining the role of education in the lives of girls living at the foot of Mt. Kilimanjaro, anthropologist Amy Stambach (2000) wrote that schools are "pivotal social institutions around which the configuration of society as a whole is imagined, contested, and transformed" (p. 3). This has been no less true for schools in the United States, as public debates about how our society ought to be organized play out every day in state houses and district offices, locker-lined hallways, principals' offices, school lunchrooms, and of course, the P-12 classrooms where students, educators, and community members interact with one another daily.

In many ways, the coronavirus is compelling a hard reconsideration of the configuration not just of schools, but of society itself (in a manner that foreshadows the far more momentous changes looming with the climate crisis). Even after the pandemic ebbs, the aims of public education will remain in contention. It is our collective responsibility, as we deliberate courses of action, to keep in mind these competing public purposes of schooling and to be clear-eyed about which goals get privileged, who is impacted by them, and who has a seat at the table when important decisions are made. The reconstruction of our schools in the aftermath of the pandemic must closely attend to the tensions between these aims, if the process is to result in a more democratic, equitable, and just education of our children.

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