

A Democratic View of “No Child Left Behind”

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For those of us living in America, across all ages, races, and geographic areas, there exists an often unspoken concept of what *democracy* means. From a very young age, our children are taught about the freedoms of our country, the Bill of Rights, the precepts and history of the Constitution. Drive through any city in the United States today, and you will see countless “support our soldiers” signs and American flags proudly waving from porches and automobiles, professing our patriotic love of all things for which democracy stands. Americans *know* and feel a *sense* of democracy, even if they are often unable to verbalize it in a precise manner. The following is a theoretical framework that attempts first, drawing from John Dewey, Henry Giroux, Peter Hlebowitsh, and others, to set forth five basic tenets of democracy with which most Americans would agree and then carries over those tenets to the democratic education that is suggested by this framework. Finally, the congressional act known as No Child Left Behind will be examined through the lens of this framework.

What Is Democracy?

Democracy is based on a shared social spirit of mutual interests.

A democracy is comprised of people who share mutual interests and a spirit of commitment to these interests. In America, these interests include the well-being, liberty, and equality of all. The common problems, issues, and values of the population are respected, reconstructed, and addressed through the democracy (Hlebowitsh, 1985). For Boyd Bode, this spirit of common interests and purposes was the most important aspect of a democracy (1937).

Democracy is based on a community of cooperation and free interaction between social groups.

According to Dewey, a democracy is made up of people who participate in full and free interaction between various communities of people. These frequent changes in social habit involve readjustment, reorganization, and ultimately progress through the new situations produced as a result of wider relationships and intercourse. A group that isolates itself with the intent of protecting its own interests and keeping its status quo will become static and rigid (Dewey, 1916).

Adding to this are James Macdonald and David Purpel, who write that in a democratic community, “democracy means participation and community means people in communication and communion” (1987, p. 183). It follows, then, that a democracy is indeed based on participatory interaction between groups of people.

Democracy is based on the belief that society will continue to reorganize and progress.

Dewey (1916) argued that a democratic society does not rely on a set of customs forced upon its members by a controlling upper class. Rather, it is intentionally progressive, ever widening its interests, encouraging its members to act continuously as guardians over the democracy. According to Henry Giroux, democracy is dynamic by nature and should never be reduced to a set of “inherited principles and institutional arrangements” (1990, p. 364). Democracy assumes that its people will continue over time to provide insight and criticism leading to continued growth and progress.

Democracy is based on respect for individuals.

This tenet, of course, is one with which every American is familiar. A democratic society respects its people, despite gender, race, or economic status. Individuality is not only accepted but encouraged as well. As Hlebowitsh (1985) writes, a democracy is socially conscious, respectful of the individual, and it must endorse experiences for both the collective and individual gain of its people.

Democracy is based on the belief that all useful services are valued, not only economically favorable ones.

In writing about democracy, Dewey advocated, as most Americans would today, that the members of the community must all contribute to society, that a “social return be demanded from all” (1916, p. 122). Furthermore, he added that this return can be cultural or industrial, an intellectual affair or a social service. In other words, *all* contributions to society, offered at the capacity of the individual, are worthy. In addition, all of the citizens of a democratic society are entitled to the possibilities that would enable them to find their useful roles in society, transcending social class.

What Is a Democratic Education?

The previous section presented a theoretical framework for democracy. This section presents the logical conclusions based on this framework when the five tenets are applied to public education in a democracy.

If democracy is based on a shared social spirit of mutual interests, then education should address the interests of everyone, and it should live in that spirit, not merely prepare for it.

In a democratic education, school should not be viewed as merely preparation for future lives, whether for careers or college. School should be viewed *as*

life. The activities and learning that students experience in school should serve to construct the mutual interests of the school community, as well as the society as a whole. Macdonald and Purpel write that education should add to that spirit, by freeing students from "barriers to human dignity and potential such as those that come from being poor, frightened, misguided, ignorant, and unaffirmed—in a word, controlled" (1987, p. 187). Instead, it should bring them to human liberation, a sense of self-fulfillment and freedom. According to Bode, a school based on the philosophy of democracy should be one to which students go to learn not only for the future, but to carry on a way of life in the present as well (1937).

If democracy is based on cooperation and free interaction between social groups, then democratic education should allow children to participate and contribute in their education.

If, as suggested, democratic education serves in part to help students develop their shared mutual interests, it follows that the pupils should participate and contribute in their own education. The traditional school with teacher as master and students as passive receivers does not exhibit this philosophy. The teacher is not to serve as an external authority, but rather the students should volunteer their own dispositions and interests (Dewey, 1916). Within a school based on the theory of democracy, students should as individuals and in social groups be "alive, active, working hard, inventing, organizing, contributing original ideas, assembling materials, carrying out enterprises" (Rugg and Shumaker, 1969 p. 57). Cooperation, communication, and understanding should exist and enhance the learning and growth. A school's environment and curriculum should reflect the interests of its population (Hlebowitsh, 1985).

If democracy is based on reorganization and progress, then education should be seen as a means of growth for individuals and society.

One of the purposes of a democratic education should be to groom citizens capable of questioning and critically examining the basic precepts of society instead of merely accepting and adapting to them (Giroux, 1990). It is this capacity that allows for the growth, reorganization, and ultimately, progress that a true democracy requires. Dewey (1916) wrote that education should acknowledge its social responsibilities and the primary goal should not be to teach students how to make a living, but rather to enlighten and discipline them with the concerns and interests of humanity.

If democracy is based on respect for individuals, then a democratic education should have intellectual opportunities for all, and it should value intellectual variances.

A society that claims to be democratic should permit intellectual opportunities to be accessible to all. It is the business of democratic schools to educate fully each individual to his or her capacity. For this to occur, education should allow for and encourage intellectual variances. It should be assumed that all students and citizens will have aims and ideas of their own and not merely be sub-

jected to a few in positions of authority (Dewey, 1916). Furthermore, Dewey added, education cannot be narrowly conceived for utilitarian purposes for the masses and higher education for only a select few. As he wrote, “The notion that the ‘essentials’ of elementary education are the three R’s mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for realization of democratic ideals” (1916, p. 192).

If democracy is based on the belief that all useful services are valued, not only economic ones, then education should honor and foster all knowledge.

If education based on a democratic philosophy is to offer equal opportunities to all, then it should function under the conviction that all societal services are worthy. The curriculum should operate on the belief that educational activities and experiences should be connected to each other and to the actual lives of the students. Decoding text, for example, cannot be advocated as more socially important than conducting science laboratory experiments or learning about symmetry in an art class because it could possibly lead to a financially better quality of life. In addition, the content should be interrelated and as integrated as possible. As Dewey (1916) wrote, separation and isolation of the content areas leads to a separation of social classes. A democracy cannot use economic return as its criterion for valuing education. The intrinsic social and moral worth should be considered.

Is the “No Child Left Behind” Act Democratic by Nature?

In January of 2002, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The United States Department of Education’s website (<http://www.ed.gov>) promoting this law is laced with corporate verbiage, such as “global marketplace,” “quality management,” “economic leadership,” and “financial security.” The website proclaims that NCLB will “ensure schools get results” by demanding “more value from the investment.” A simple scan of the law shows its clear intention—better-skilled students lead to better-skilled workers and national economic growth. Other than the title, very little of our democracy’s education reform agenda will serve to promote the tenets of a true democracy.

The act is comprised of four major components: increased accountability, greater flexibility at state and local levels, encouraging proven education methods, and more choices for parents and students. This section will attempt to examine each of these components, comparing them with the ideas of democratic education set forth previously.

Increased accountability

This law requires schools to measure every public school student’s progress in reading and math every year from third through eighth grades and at least once between tenth through twelfth grades. In addition, by 2007 students will also be tested in science. For the first time ever, schools will have their funding attached

to their standardized tests performance. Schools that show adequate yearly progress will be rewarded financially with Academic Achievement Rewards. Schools that do not demonstrate results will have their federal funds reduced. This rewarding and withholding of funds will not eliminate the achievement gap between the rich and poor in our country. Rather, our nation's poorest schools will be penalized financially thereby rendering them even less likely to succeed.

Each state has set a bar of student achievement that must be met. This first-time bar is based on one of the lowest scoring schools or demographic groups in the state. Every school must attain this bar after two years and subsequent thresholds every three years, until at the end of twelve years, all students are achieving at proficiency level or higher. Interestingly, the "Testing for Results" section of the NCLB website (ed.gov) states, "if a single annual test were the only device a teacher used to gauge student performance, it would indeed be inadequate." However, an annual test is exactly what the government will use as the basis of its funding decisions. The site also acknowledges that "some students score poorly for reasons outside the classroom. A good evaluation system will reflect the diversity of student learning and achievement." Standardized tests will neither reflect student diversity of learning and achievement nor consider reasons outside of the classroom for why students might score poorly. The site further admits that testing "does sometimes cause anxiety . . . young people need to be equipped to deal with it." Despite stories of young elementary students crying because they are nervous about the high-stakes test about to be undertaken, no cure is offered to help them or their teachers "deal with it."

Is the call for increased accountability democratic? It does not seem to be. Testing done in up to three content areas almost yearly does not address the interests of everyone and definitely views education as mere skill preparation for a future career. Mandates handed down from upper-level politicians with no dialogue with the vast majority of children, teachers, and families that are affected by them are not based on a democratic spirit of cooperation and interaction. Using one standardized test each year to determine math and reading skills does not hold schools accountable for what a truly democratic education should be. Nowhere in this system are critical inquiry and human enlightenment evaluated. To assume that students are learning to become citizens capable of realizing the democratic ideal because they are sufficient in drill exercises in reading and mathematics is woefully misguided. Furthermore, the call for higher accountability via standardized testing is undemocratic because it does not honor all knowledge. It plays the power card, deciding for Americans what makes one legitimately educated. It comes close to the ideological attack that Apple (1993) writes is so dangerous, especially when done on the cheap.

Greater flexibility at state and local levels

The second major component of NCLB is a claim for greater freedom at the state and local levels. States were permitted to create, and for the most part pay for,

their own assessments. Local schools were given the freedom to make spending decisions with up to fifty percent of the non-Title 1 federal funds they receive. Funds, therefore, could be transferred from one account to another. Schools that decide to teach to the test or already have demographics that will probably result in proficient scores will be financially rewarded. Schools with low scores, the very schools in need of added financial assistance, will be penalized. Meanwhile, most schools are relying heavily on property taxes for their school funds to begin with, already an undemocratic process. Neighborhoods with affluent homes and businesses send more money to their schools, while struggling, depressed communities have very little to contribute to their local schools by way of property taxes. Students in these poor areas usually receive the state minimum per pupil. And lest we forget, public school systems are losing billions of dollars annually to corporations given property tax breaks (Weaver, 2003). With the already inequitable state of affairs of school funding, NCLB dishonors the system further in tying funding to testing for the first time ever, further setting up our most economically deprived schools for failure.

If NCLB truly granted greater financial freedom at the state and local levels, then perhaps it would be democratic. Schools would be able to address all of their population's interests, and funding could be progressive in nature. In reality, however, school funding could not be less democratic. The amount of money spent per pupil varies by thousands of dollars. Students in poor schools have less qualified teachers, fewer resources for learning, and less community support, all of which contribute to lower test scores. Under this system, individuals are not respected, and the playing field is not level, yet NCLB acts as though it were.

Encouraging proven education methods

This component can be broken down into two parts: teachers and methods. To begin with, NCLB states that all teachers must be highly qualified by the 2005–2006 school year. They must hold at least a bachelor's degree, have full state certification, and have demonstrated competence in their subject area. To do this, NCLB allows states the flexibility to find alternative certification routes, often creating “short cut” approaches to becoming a teacher, reducing or eliminating the education coursework. At the same time, it ignores the unique circumstances of rural, inner-urban, and middle schools, which all frequently employ teachers trained in education to teach in different content areas. The law also gives districts the right to reward good teachers with merit pay and to give bonuses to teachers in high-need subject areas, such as math and science. The law states that districts will be “free to use their funds” for these various suggestions. With schools in high-poverty areas unable to pay teachers competitively to begin with, NCLB permitting them to pay teachers more does not matter. In addition, NCLB states that one percent of the funding for this program is set aside for the Secretary of Education to award grants to states that assess their teachers' perform-

ances using gains in student academic achievement. In other words, states willing to assess their teachers based on their students’ performances will be rewarded financially for doing so. This will not encourage quality teaching but rather teaching to the test.

The second aspect of this component is the call for proven methods. Only scientifically proven approaches and programs in reading and mathematics, and later, other areas, will be funded. Education programs, or “fads,” as the ed.gov website refers to them, that have not undergone rigorous scientific research will not be supported. Instead, schools that use officially tested and empirically sound programs will be financially rewarded. To decide which programs constitute proven methods and which are “fads,” the U.S. Department of Education has established the What Works Clearinghouse, an organization developed to identify approaches in education that have been scientifically proven to be successful. The What Works Clearinghouse website (<http://www.w-w-c.org/july2003.html>) states, “Over time . . . parents will be able to ask their principal, teachers and school board members about the extent to which they select programs and curricula that the research has determined to be effective.” Teachers will be expected to know what is on the What Works Clearinghouse’s approved list of approaches and to teach using only those approaches.

In addition, the site states that teachers “need a central, trusted, and independent source of evidence about what really works in education.” It declares, “conflicting interpretations and disagreements about a study’s finding cause confusion among education practitioners.” Statements such as these convey the idea that teachers have no informed knowledge about how and what to teach their students. Their educational experience, knowledge in the field, and knowledge of individual students is not enough information for teachers to know what really works in their classrooms, according to NCLB. While providing information on the reliability of educational methods to educators and the public is a good practice, attaching school funds to only those programs that make the Clearinghouse’s list is not. How can NCLB promote democracy when it stifles individuality and progress by forcing teachers into certain methods and tying funding to them?

More choices for students and parents

If, under NCLB, a school is labeled as failing due to low standardized test scores, the parents of children in that school have the option of transferring their child to another higher-scoring public or private school. This will be at the expense of the failing school. In addition, failing schools may be required to provide supplemental services to their students, again at their own expense. These services could be tutoring and mentoring, after-school programs, or remedial classes. The “Facts About Faith-Based Efforts” portion of the Department of Education website suggests that faith-based organizations can provide these programs. When the website shifts to this fact sheet, the rhetoric changes considerably. The

corporate speech is replaced with loaded phrases such as “spread the message” and “rally the armies of compassion.” This is clearly a call for private organizations to improve or replace, if necessary, public education. It is undemocratic to arrange for weak, penalized schools to fail. It is unlikely that requiring a failing school to use some of its precious funds to send its pupils to other schools will enable it to crawl out of the failing category. In addition, the transferring of students from failing schools to successful ones is being handled undemocratically. Students in schools labeled as failing often have populations including families with limited English, limited literacy, limited resources, and limited leisure time. These parents are unlikely to take advantage of their right to transfer their children to better schools. In Springfield, Illinois, for example, six elementary schools were labeled as failing in 2003, making 148 children eligible to transfer for the 2003–2004 school year. Two did. This reflects the trend across the state and nation (Friedman, 2003).

In addition, this component is highly underfunded. Chicago public schools had 133,000 students eligible for reading and math tutoring under NCLB rules, but they could afford to provide tutoring to only 25,000 to 30,000. Similarly, thousands of children in Chicago who were eligible to transfer under this reform were not provided the opportunity due to lack of space in better schools. 270,000 Chicago students were eligible for “choice” of schools, 19,000 applied, a mere 1,097 spots were available, and at last count, about 500 actually transferred (Rado and Olszewski, 2003).

Conclusions

No Child Left Behind does not meet any of the previously set forth characteristics of a democratic education: (a) it focuses solely on pre-determined skills to prepare students for a financially secure future, (b) it lacks free interaction and participation, (c) it does not promote societal progress, (d) it lacks respect for individual variances, and (e) it does not value all knowledge. Never does it acknowledge factors other than teachers and methods that are critical to the success of a school: class size, building facilities, demographics, family support, mentoring for new teachers, amount spent per pupil, and administration, to name but some. Our legislators represent the interests of their constituents, and therefore in theory NCLB represents the will of the people. In reality, however, this law does little to support the people of our nation and is, therefore, not democratic.

This year, millions of children across our nation will walk into their classrooms, sharpen their no. 2 pencils, take their seats, and begin to take a high-stakes standardized test. Some of them will have been beaten that morning, others will not have had breakfast or even dinner the night before, some will have colds, headaches, or other health problems, some will be grieving over recent deaths in their families, some will be worried about typical adolescent problems,

some will be overly anxious about taking the test, and some will simply not care about the test. All, however, will take it; all will be part of this widespread instrument of accountability, because, as our nation's president has declared, *no child will be left behind*.

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