
GRASSROOTS EDUCATION AND THE NECESSITY OF RELATION

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There is little public left in U.S. public education. A rich sense of the public in education at a minimum would include the following: (1) inclusive public input into the aims of public education, (2) equity in resources for all student-citizens, (3) tuition-free education seen as a public good and funded out of public monies, and (4) inclusive, i.e., all age-appropriate young people would be allowed to attend and participate. The public so defined would fill at least two significant roles in education today. First, it would serve to constitute the substantive content of education that represented the public or people's interests, and second, the public would envision, formulate and direct the processes of education. Neither of these two roles is being filled today by what we call "public education." Even public funding systems, the least substantive and most instrumental form of public input in education, have been declared as unconstitutional and non-democratic in growing numbers of states.¹ Beyond the question of constitutionality in funding, schools and communities face growing pressure to privatize charter schools and open them to the forces of the free-market system rather than put them in the hands and the voice of the people.

The two significant roles for the public mentioned above have been significantly appropriated by state and national control. Indicators of the erosion of public control of education include, but are not limited to, the imposition of high stakes testing, the push for standardized curriculum, increased decision making by non-educators, and a focus on the needs and interests of the corporate world, rather than that of the people, a diverse public. Why, given the potential loss of a vital public good, have many folks not raised their voices in complaint? Is it the case that the hegemony of the institutions of the U.S. has left the people who make up the public with little regard for their role as change agents or participatory citizens? These types of questions have led me to argue two points in this paper. First, our system of pseudo-public education continues to grow in its non-public character. This occurs, in part, because this pseudo-public education does not create an uncomfortable life for those who may be in positions of power to challenge it. It is worth a reminder that simply because some do not see the harm of losing the public does not mean there is no harm taking place with its loss. Second, I will explore how *not* paying attention to relation erodes the robust sense of public I wish to see our public schools embrace.

Public-barren public education leaves behind those who were marginalized either prior to the loss of the public or who are left out as a consequence of the loss of the public in public education. Although I am speaking of a loss of the public, it should be noted that there has never been an inclusive self-determining public education on a wide-scale basis. But rather than moving

the public towards such a goal, I am arguing that we are moving farther away. Those who were marginalized prior to the loss of the public are often identified as the indigenous and the involuntary immigrants in the United States. Add to these the folks who are joining the ranks of the marginalized due to the loss of publicly defined content and processes in education. These would include the growing number of the working poor, the homeless, and certain groups internationally, especially those from the Global South. In addition to groups often associated with marginalization, I would add that the loss of the public has made significant in-roads into the mainstream middle class population as well. Students, parents, and in particular, teachers (most of whom are middle class) have lost the democratic public voice that should be associated with a substantive democracy and education.

These claims are interactive in nature. For example, with the loss of the public there is necessarily a loss of relation, and likewise, with the loss of relation there is necessarily a loss of the public. This paper will trace only some beginning arguments for these claims as it is beyond the scope of this work to explicate the complexity of these problems. Understanding that much of what occurs in education and schooling today is directed by non-public and non-democratic means, it is important for us to think about how we want to understand the fullness of the public, both conceptually and concretely. In this paper I connect the work of Esteva and Prakash, who are writing about the “global project” and grassroots movements in response, to that of Paula Gunn Allen, who, in her narrative style, describes the relational understandings that underpin a more humane worldview.² Understanding the responses to the “global project” that Esteva and Prakash describe will shed light on potential ways of gaining the public voice in education today for which I am arguing.

Esteva and Prakash point out that “wherever people abandon their own forms of cultural initiation, they lose their common sense; their cultural sense and sensibility, developed in their commons....Common sense is what people have in common; the sense that can be found only in community.” It is important to note that the concept of commons that Esteva and Prakash describe is not one that hearkens back to old forms of community, but one that looks forward to how we might create new relationships through commons. This notion of “common” as common sense and sensibilities should contribute to what would create a public and must include an inclusive sense of identity(ies) and relation. One of the differences between our modern concept of democracy and the local, participatory democracy that is called for by more and more social majorities is that “in their commons, ‘the people’ are attached to each other by duties and obligations, not by abstract notions of rights. They are bound together by the common ‘sense’ that is part of belonging; of participating in shaping or sharing common ways of living and dying.”³

Currently and as part of the “global project”, there are many forces that are competing in our lived world that work against these “duties and obligations.” For example, in *Grassroots Postmodernism*, Esteva and Prakash argue that the steady march towards globalization is a masked modernist approach to a market-place model. In contrast and oddly enough, the indigenous traditional community actually is represented through some of the worthwhile aspects of postmodernist theory, i.e., a rejection of meta-narratives and a questioning of scientific progress and rationality as the yardstick by which to measure human progress and formulate education. (It is helpful here to put aside any arguments about academic dichotomies because the way in which these authors deploy these concepts point to life survival and are more than academic; they have significance in how people live and die.) Hence, Esteva and Prakash argue for a “grassroots postmodernism” that embraces the self-determination of grassroots localities and indigenous peoples, while maintaining the principles that define democracy. This is no attempt to sentimentalize the indigenous or the marginalized. Conversely, this is an attempt to dispel the role of modernist myths as that which will “save” us of the public, or the indigenous. Their work criticizes many accepted aspects of education and trappings of progress and may seem even counter-intuitive to many of us in the modern world. (I mean, who wouldn’t want a flush toilet or modern grocery stores?)

Esteva and Prakash draw a distinction between the vast numbers of people on the earth who live without many of the “advantages” of modern life, and name these folks the “social majority.” Those who control the economic, military and political power in the world are named the “social minorities.” Because it is clear that the social minorities have benefited the most from practices related to so-called “global projects,” including education, Esteva and Prakash state that,

Daily “the people” learn from experience that real democracy depends on localism: local areas where people live and exercise their power. ‘Democracy doesn’t mean putting power some place other than where the people are.’ “The people” ...know that vicarious power is a very poor substitute for real power. They want real democracy, nothing more and nothing less than people’s power... “Real” democracy means creating people’s power—literally speaking.⁴

Certainly democracies across the world have constitutional guarantees for their “people’s power.” That is one of the defining characteristics of a democracy. But other forces have continually stood in the way of making good on this guarantee. Some impediments were written into constitutions and these had to be amended. Others still, with more subtlety have allowed the “people’s power” to be eroded. I acknowledge this when I see that pragmatically my only two choices for a national political office are Republican and Democrat candidates,

both of whom have enormous amounts of money and influence. I acknowledge this when I see that consumerism trumps cooperative citizenship, and when NIMBY attitudes pervade our people. In referring to the oft-used expression of the 21st Century, the “global project” has created more for those who already have, and loss and destruction for those upon whose back it is carried out. “Modernity never did bring democracy to them [the social majorities]; but damaged the democracy of their commons.”⁵

Simplistically speaking, this is how the damage occurs. With modern progress and economic growth (as defined by the social minorities), there is a need for more education for the social majorities. Given we operate (and the “global project” operates) as a capitalistic economic system, there is no way that *even if* everyone receives a modern style education that all can reach basic or moderate levels of economic material existence. This is so because if we educate all citizens with westernized skills, the expectation is that they do not have to work low-paying, menial jobs with little to no benefits. In the meantime with this promise of education, progress and modernization has taken people away from their commons and culture and more times than not, creates a self-disdain, and leaves them with no “place.” Said through the words of Esteva and Prakash: “de-skilled or weaned from their subsistence economy, they fall into the trap of needing a job, savings, welfare, daycare... Once their dignity or competence is no longer accepted or recognized without a diploma, they begin to need education.”⁶ Education has become a necessary commodity... a commodity in a global marketplace with winners and losers. Lost is personal, communal and cultural self-sufficiency, notions of informal education as that which can be substantive, and then loss of the grassroots and local knowledge itself, generally denoting a loss of intergenerationality. The public is eroded.

Rarely do we deconstruct these and other concepts of globalization and their implications in our schools or broader mainstream society in the U.S. At a minimum, it is imperative to recognize that globalization implies a set of relationships of various kinds. Let us consider four kinds. These include (1) political relations/power; (2) economic relations/capital plus power; (3) cultural relations/sustainability; and (4) human relations/psycho-social-spiritual. Under the rule of the social minorities, the first two types of relations (political and economic) threaten the next two (cultural and human). The consequence of this is that we are using/misusing other human lives/cultures/environments for the wants defined by the social minorities. This poses a great danger to the idea of the public, the common, and democracy. To understand this threat more clearly I will turn to a more explicit discussion of relationality.

Paula Gunn Allen speaks of the various ways that Western ideals ensconced in current U.S. education demean and overlook various modes of relationality. She names three modernist concepts that must be examined and

rethought if we are to grasp a relational commons. These are proprietorship, literacy, and separatism. For purposes of this discussion, my primary focus will be on the concept of proprietorship (ownership) that she claims is hypnotically illusory. She writes that one cannot stop the natural process of living things in order to possess them – unless one is willing for them to die. She states, “I can only relate to land or money as a living thing, because *I* am living and because relationship is process. I cannot own a relationship. I cannot stop the process of relationship. But I can use land; I can use capital – both as a means towards expressing my aliveness and of maintaining it.” Here, Gunn Allen is calling for a radical paradigm shift from a worldview built on possession to a worldview grounded in *use* to define our standing in relationship to.⁷

She indicates that modernism and the Western ideal wants us to be metaphorically presbyterian (small “p”) in that we want and seek over-control, organization, and perfection. She exclaims that instead, we should “mov(e) with the exhilaration, joy, and the sense of just being together.” In contrast to the artist who paints a picture seeking a gallery to have talent acknowledged, Gunn Allen rejoins that “it is a very easy thing to do to make a bit of loveliness that’s a musing between yourself and your world.” This is a relationship with oneself and one’s world. It is not a commodification.⁸

Drawing upon her concept of use rather than proprietorship, and relationship rather than presbyterianism, I would invite us to look at the direction of education today. The incessant talk of accountability is presbyterian and works against relationality. Schooling is presbyterian. So many of us and our teacher education students must get that “A” that represents excellence, perfection, control over, well, *who knows what?* It is over-control and possession of something that should not be considered as able to be given away, i.e., the self and the wonders of the world.

Although we seek a commons when we live in social groups, there is a line that must respect the individual and privacy—and I’m not talking here about traditional notions of individuals or privacy. Gunn Allen calls this “inward-bound.” She describes it as the space that ties us to time, place, history, culture in an identity-defining process. Gunn Allen shares a lesson that her mother taught her about being Indian and the line that creates the “inward-bound”. Behind that line is a place that no one can cross, and where there is everything “that is mine, that is me... maybe that’s what makes us what we are. It’s not the same as ‘keeping secrets,’ no. It is simply recognizing that one’s self is inviolate; the private soul is private, not public. It’s neither commodity nor consumable. It is most like the center of silence that is the always-flowing wellspring of life, ...like the sweet, sweet spring where every day my mother went to draw water for her family’s use.”⁹ I have a deep worry when anyone assumes to cross this without invitation and experience. Conversely, I also worry when we ignore this line in schools.

In our western world-view, we might call this “inward-bound” space, a place where the individual resides as unique personhood. We talk about the self all the time in learning theory, but this concept of the “inward-bound” goes beyond that. Perhaps it is the “I–Thou” space of which Buber speaks.¹⁰ It is relational and yet unique. It is generally not part of school-talk.

What if we thought about education and schooling in the way Gunn Allen suggests:

The ability to think in terms of cooperation [that] makes it humanly possible... for a greater interplay among humans on terms that human psyches and spirits can comprehend. When the concepts of possessiveness or proprietorship disappear as being meaningful in our lives, the haunting sense of separation from the universe will be lessened.¹¹

Let us play with education, with learning. As Sidorkin notes, let us consider school fundamentally as an excuse to come together as human beings.¹² It is in this play and space that we exist... in relation... in public because “all orders of existence depend for their meaning on the context and identity of everything else.” Because of this inevitable degree of connection that goes all the way down, Gunn Allen advocates for a learning that is comprised of wisdom and that requires vulnerability. She asks,

And what is vulnerability? Just this: the ability to be wrong, to be foolish, to be weak and silly, to be an idiot. It is the ability to accept one’s unworthiness, to accept one’s vanity for what it is. It’s the ability to be whatever and whoever you are—recognizing that you, like the world, like the earth, are fragile, and that in your fragility lies all possibility of growth and of death, and that the two are one and the same.¹³

How many of us seriously think that the so-called public schooling we see, experience and hear about today opens spaces for this kind of vulnerability? Hardly so, instead public schooling is presbyterian (small “p”!). Too many of us as educators seek control rather than open the door to potential vulnerability, to that experience that may not be controllable, such as the emotions, the empowerment of student voice, to non-school like behaviors, to what may be or at least feels like chaos. Even more deeply, we as educators may be afraid to fail personally as teachers so we keep the keel even. Institutionally and politically, vulnerability is staved off through the shallow definition of, but the heavy bureaucracy of accountability.

So how do we bring together the project of the public, of radical democracy, and relation? I would like to use an example that Esteva and Prakash discuss in their book and then parallel that to education. That example is eating;

I assume we can all relate. They note that eating is a superbly relational event, and quoting Blair, state that eating is a “profoundly social and ecological event that connects us in the most intimate and primary way to others, to our land, water, and soil, to the future, and to other species.” As many of us know through certain holiday traditions, “customs and rituals surrounding the growing, preparation and serving of food are at the heart of community and communion—the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world,” according to Berry. For most of us social minorities, this kind of eating only occurs occasionally and often around holidays. It is *not an aspect of daily life* because it does not have to be. But what if we wanted it to be? And what is lost when it is not?¹⁴

Esteva and Prakash also distinguish how the social minorities have, for the most part, become “industrial eaters.” This means that we rely on “convenience, ease, speed, saving time and energy for consuming food offer modern freedom: to pursue the goals and activities that define modern identity.” This “transmogrifies peoples into consumers who consume commons in pursuit of the illusion of being an individual self.” This includes a separation from any of the growing and production processes and even still, from preparation and the important space of time. They contrast the style of “industrial eaters” with the conceptual depth of “comida”—which is a Spanish word that connotes a communal commons eating experience.¹⁵

They then tell of their experience in a small mountain town in Mexico, with the colors and clothing of the people, the time, the stories. Invited to eat with the family, the authors “entered the very warm place of dona Reugio, [the mother]. She was squatting on the floor, at the very center of the room—her place of cooking. We sat down around her, chatting with her and her family for more than two hours. Hand-to-hand, she gave us each a piece of chicken—which she cooked because she knew there were guests....” The authors wondered why this woman had not moved from this small mountain town (since her family had the material means to do so) and as they listened to the conversation, they saw that “all her ‘reasons’ reveal how profoundly her whole world is embedded in the ‘we’ of a soil culture.” Yes, I do not deny there are gendered roles, and poverty, and disease and other issues we could discuss, but something very fundamental about human existence was at the heart of this community and the experience of *comida*.¹⁶

I share this experience, not to exoticize the rural mountain woman, but to highlight the question that her choice to remain on the mountain raises. Oh yes, many of us may fall into the trap of romanticizing such a life. Make no mistake; it is a hard life. My hunch is that many privileged persons cannot imagine why one would stay on the mountain when one had the material means to live a more comfortable life. While we may seek out such a travel vacation, most of us know that we have the comforts of modernity awaiting our return. This is why

the question of why she would stay on the mountain in harsh daily circumstances is important. What does she gain?

As the authors analyze this experience they note that,

Comida defines a social condition in which power remains in the hands of the people. It is their source of solidarity and conviviality; their antidote to ragged, lonely individualism. Every post-modern group has to rediscover its own cultural ideal of *comida*—in its attempts to rediscover sustainable living.... In this search, this adventure for rediscovery, going beyond the deprivation, sadness and monotony of modernity, we may find secret hidden stocks of a still unknown class of *comida*.¹⁷

If I were to parallel *comida* to education and schooling, I would be looking for very different things than what the politicians, standardists and pundits search for, as well as the superintendents, some parents, teachers and professors. Education, to retain or invigorate its relationality and public commonness, must be defined by grassroots culture, wherever that is (and it is not just in marginalized and poor places). Like the *comida*, education is profoundly social and connects land, people and time. In like manner, when we destroy the *comida* aspect of education or communal education, then we transmogrify people (our students) into *industrial students*...simply consumers separated from the growth and production and process and preparation of learning. If grassroots culture includes a deep sense of self-determination and voice, an inclusion and respect of locality and place, a relational sense of self and others, then grassroots education would require these things as well. And just as we would not want to exoticize or romanticize these notions for a given culture, I would suggest that we must study them in education to understand their relationship to what it means to be human.

Another dimension not yet discussed is what stems from the modern global project. Industrial students are also “‘educated’ to be oblivious to the harm done by purchasing from multinational agribusiness and others,” thus destroying the cultural commons of the grassroots radical locality.¹⁸ In educational terms, we industrial students (and teachers) are educated to be oblivious to the harm done by educating to someone’s standards and proficiency tests and parochial insular viewpoints. We, of the middle class and above, are educated to be oblivious to the harm done by tracking, by labeling, and by the “othering” of folks not like us in school. The vast majority of pre-service teachers with whom I converse truly have not even considered that other students not in their social circles are having very different experiences in school. Insular viewpoints—the thought has not crossed their minds until someone brings these ideas upon their horizon for them to consider.

Esteva and Prakash note that “radical democracy is not a historically existing institution, but a historical *project* which can only exist as a never-ending horizon. It is not about a ‘government’ but about governance.”¹⁹ We have a huge challenge before us if we chose to recreate education along the lines of the grassroots, the local, the relational. I am still unsure of what it might look like, but I take solace in the thought that it may be a project and not an end. I know that the cost of not engaging in such a project will continue to visit great harm. Unfortunately, the very way that our fairly non-public, non-democratic institutions are responsible for education, actively works to prevent a rich and vital sense of public education that is meaningful and is representative of people’s education. Hence, one can either conclude that institutions must change to take account of relation in order to foster and offer public education that is truly public, or that public education must be seen as divorced from its current sponsoring agencies and offered anew through a self-determined form of the people’s “voice,” work, and responsibility. The public would require no less.

NOTES

1. For those states that have challenged the system of schooling funding, the courts have declared the current property-tax reliant system to be unconstitutional in that it creates significant inequities. Given that school attendance is compulsory and that equity is promised to all citizens by state institutions, and given that the heavy reliance on property-tax funds school inequitably, the funding formulas have been declared unconstitutional since the state cannot require its citizens to be treated inequitably. For additional detail, see the case of *DeRolph v the State of Ohio*.

2. Allen, P., *Off the reservation: reflections on boundary-busting, border crossing, loose cannons* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), and G. Esteva & M. Prakash, *Grassroots postmodernism: remaking the soil of cultures* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

3. Esteva and Prakash, 159.

In addition, other scholars have written about contemporary western culture as one based on rights, rather than being “bound together” as Esteva and Prakash describe. Presenting an argument that critiques our western rights based culture is beyond the scope of this paper. Readers may look to Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights talk: the impoverishment of political discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1993), and Carol Gould, *Rethinking democracy: freedom and social cooperation in politics, economy, and society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) for a further discussion of this topic.

Other contemporary authors from a variety of disciplines have discussed the ennui of our current time and that our modern technological society is fragmented and lacks meaning for many. Robert Bellah, et al. *Habits of the*

Heart: Individualism and commitment in American Life (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985), Alasdair McIntyre, *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), Maxine Greene, *The dialectic of freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), and Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999) are just a few of the authors who speak to this state of affairs.

4. Esteva and Prakash, 158-159.
 5. Esteva and Prakash, 153.
 6. Esteva and Prakash, 26-27. This may remind one of the similar historical movement in the United States from an agrarian society to an industrial one, and then from an industrial society to a technological and service-oriented society. Each move provides great challenges for schools and each move has continued to leave certain folks unprepared or overprepared and behind.
 7. Allen, 18.
 8. Allen, 61.
 9. Allen, 225.
 10. Buber, M., *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1970).
 11. Allen, 20.
 12. Sidorkin, A., *Beyond discourse: Education, the self, and dialogue* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999).
 13. Allen, 63 & 65.
 14. Esteva and Prakash, 53.
 15. Esteva and Prakash, 52.
 16. Esteva and Prakash, 57.
 17. Esteva and Prakash, 66-67.
 18. Esteva and Prakash, 25.
 19. Esteva and Prakash, 159.
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