

**Reconnecting Community:
The Case for Intradependence in the Age of Radical Individualism**

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Abstract:

-The Radical Individual: a Societal Framework

The societal atmosphere of consumerism and market competition in the U.S. fuels radical individualism that threatens citizen's ability to adopt a community-oriented perspective and tolerate differences. At the same time, society is experiencing broad diversification and encountering complex problems that can only be solved with collaboration requiring a community-oriented viewpoint. Thus, the nature of these sorts of problems necessitates a reorientation of the values of American society.

-Applications for Education: Reorienting Values

Education has long been acknowledged as a moral tool with the potential to instill society with the necessary values required for political control. Examining separation and ability grouping in schools highlights the American obsession with individualism and suggests that there is room to reform schools to support the adoption of more egalitarian virtues in students to initiate the shift towards a more community-oriented and civic minded society. Instead of using grouping to better meet students' needs, diversity in classrooms should be encouraged to provide a wide variety of viewpoints while educators should take more initiative to understand carefully the individual needs of students to match them with a mode of learning that best suits their ability profile. Schools cannot pretend to be neutral. They must promote core values consistent with Democracy, while acknowledging diverse viewpoints.

In discussing the public impact of education, we must first start with an understanding of the forces influencing American society.

The Meaning of *Success*: the Individual, Growth and Societal Trends

As we have more steadfastly clung to an individual orientation to life, as we have defined life plans as synonymous with competition in the race for material accumulation, and as we have elevated the status of the risk takers among us, the accolade 'successful' has come to be a much better cultural 'fit' than the accolade 'virtuous.' Virtue speaks of attention to shouldering one's obligations to others and is therefore more at home in a community-oriented worldview. Success, by contrast, confines itself to the level of the individual.

- *Paul Theobald (Parker 2003)*

The meaning of "success" in American culture offers profound insight into societal actions. Clearly, no one definition can suffice, however American culture has, to a large extent, defined success in terms of growth and increasing material wealth. In their critique of the American political economy, William Ophuls and Stephen Boyan Jr. go so far as to say, "Growth is the secular religion of American society, providing a social goal, a basis for political solidarity, and a source of individual motivation. The pursuit of happiness has come to be defined almost exclusively in material terms, and the entire society- individuals, enterprises, the government itself- has an enormous vested interest in the continuation of growth" (Dryzek and Schlosberg 2005). Although it may be possible to envision a community-oriented version of growth, the variety of growth that has been adopted by the United States operates on competition, marketization, consumerism and individualism. The current societal trends which emphasize the importance of individual interests have the double effect of blinding society to the importance of community issues and reducing sensitivity to differences in a nation of ever-increasing pluralism.

The Problem with Idiocy: Sacrificing the Common Good

By definition, increasing attention to one's individual interests comes as a sacrifice to understanding and sympathizing with diverse viewpoints. The more we isolate ourselves to celebrating the individual the less we are able to see the potential gains that are possible by maintaining a network of intradependence. Walter Parker argues in his book, *Teaching Democracy*, that idiocy- as derived from the Greek root meaning selfishness - threatens the integrity of the common good. As Parker notes, "The very fabric of modern industrial life, both its yarn and its weave is idiotic...an individually oriented worldview, indeed an infatuation with the individual, has replaced a communally oriented worldview capable of seeing and acting on the common good" (Parker, W.C. 2003). This realization comes at an unfortunate time as some of the most pressing issues that the United States faces, by their nature, require acknowledging intradependence inherent in a community-oriented worldview. The following two sections explore the ways in which environmental issues and problems with civic engagement represent failures of society to embrace intradependence.

Environmental Idiocy

Despite the fact that American environmental policy largely ignores the issue, community and global repercussions inherent in many environmental problems simply cannot be solved by individual-motivated action. The United States environmental record is a testament to the fact that our nation is deeply rooted in the pursuit of individual interest: we are the richest and most wasteful nation in the world, we refuse to participate in international environmental treaties like the Kyoto protocol on climate change and in energy plans and environmental legislation we repeatedly demonstrate our refusal to

sacrifice economic interests for the sake of the environment despite the serious warnings of scientists. As environmental policy expert Norman Vig states, “Truly global problems such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, ocean degradation, hazardous and toxic waste pollution, the spread of human and animal diseases, and nuclear proliferation require international collaboration. The United States cannot ultimately lead a world with which it refuses to cooperate in environmental diplomacy” (Vig and Kraft 2006).

Democratic Participation in Government: Increasing Apathy

As another example, society’s inability to act on behalf of the common good has, in many instances, been manifested as political apathy. Voter turnout at elections has steadily declined, especially in lower age brackets, but this is just an indication of greater troubles. As Grant Reeher notes in *Education for Citizenship*,

The problems indicated by lower turnout rates run much deeper than people failing to register and vote. Foremost among these problems, which plague voters and nonvoters alike, are a widely felt and profoundly held sense of political alienation; a distrust of organized political institutions, particularly the government; an anger toward or ambivalence about politics more generally; and a felt absence of constructive avenues for meaningful political engagement (Reeher 1997).

In short, many have lost sight of the reason that we have government in the first place. Citizens no longer know how to, or why they should actively participate in governing democracy. The focus on individual needs and wants has obscured people’s ability to see the government as an agent of public good. As Walter Parker notes in *Teaching Democracy*, “By attending exclusively and defensively to our diverse individual, cultural, and racial identities, we ignore the shared political identity and its context- the commonwealth- on which we rely to secure and nurture our diversity” (Parker 2003). To a large degree, the freedom that we are entitled to as citizens of the United States is

afforded to us by the social contract conceived by our forefathers to protect the good of the whole. Thus, by ignoring the importance of intradependence in our society, we actually compromise the individual freedoms that are protected by our government.

Given the pattern of rapid globalization and increasing pluralism along with the intradependent nature of many major issues, there seems to be, more than ever, a need to foster community values and recognition of diversity.

Education as a Moral/Political tool

Education has long been recognized as a powerful device for shaping the values and behaviors of society to create a respectful public and sense of unity. As William O’Neill writes in the book, *Rethinking Education*, “Formal education is one of the conditions (institutions) necessary for effective political control. It acts to shape social behavior at the most basic level of all, by determining whether the next generation will possess the ability and inclination to behave in a manner consonant with dominant political (and therefore moral) purposes”(O’Neill 1983). Recognition of the power of education as a moral tool and evaluating our current values are the first steps in determining how one might best use education to nurture a more community-minded and diversity-accepting society.

It is, however, idealistic to suppose that one can affect education for political gain in a top down manner to shape students into the ideal citizens. The connection between education and society is far more complex. As O’Neill writes, “The relationship between the school and society is not a one-way linear process but is reciprocal and interaffecting. The entire process occasionally ‘rationalizes backward’ in the sense that educational policies justify and confirm political policies, which generate moral policies as after-the-

fact legitimizations, and so on. There is frequently a real or potential circularity about the process” (O’Neill 1983). At the same time that we may contemplate the ways to use education to further a more community-oriented society, the reality of a consumerist and individualistic social and political framework informs educational policy to focus social attention on the individual while neglecting community. The realization of this circuitry suggests that changes may be slow in coming, and that we might have to work to change our young citizens in multiple venues to succeed. It by no means suggests that we shouldn’t try to change society in ways we think necessary. As O’Neill points out, choosing a particular set of values or behaviors to reinforce in schools for political ends is fundamentally a moral decision: “*Political philosophy is ultimately applied moral philosophy, an ideological rationale for using power to guarantee the establishment and survival and good (moral) behavior within society at large*”(O’Neill 1983). Having established a moral need to shape the values of society, we turn now to the question of how to exact these changes using education.

Educational Individualism: a Different Vision

A discussion of values may seem out of place in a contribution that purports to be scientific. Yet, if there is any societal realm in which issues of value are prominent, it is the terrain that must wrestle with the question of what constitutes gifts and how they should be identified, fostered, and mobilized within a community. For example, equity and excellence need not be indirect conflict, but there is undeniably a tension between them and particularly so in times of limited resources.

-Howard Gardner (Gardner 2006)

There has been much discussion among educators and policy experts over the shape that classrooms should have in order to promote acceptance of diversity and civic-mindedness. The principle idea behind the traditional American “common school” is that by nature of being educated together in a mixture of race, socioeconomic status, and cultural beliefs,

students will be better able to appreciate, or at least tolerate individuals different from themselves and therefore better prepared for life in the real world. Although a majority of Americans agree to this philosophy in principle, most schools have instituted at least some variety of tracking programs that separate students based on their abilities in the hope that grouping/tracking will enhance individual academic achievement by tailoring curriculum more closely to individual needs. Despite inconclusive evidence, many Americans have embraced the idea that separation facilitates academic achievement and tend to balk at attempts to eliminate grouping. As Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick comment, “Inclusion can cause strong reactions when parents in the majority begin to fear that their children’s achievement will suffer if they are taught alongside others deemed less able, or when parents in the minority fear that their children’s needs are being ignored in the name of the good of the whole” (Hochschild and Scovronick 2003).

The debate over whether students with a diversity of needs and abilities should be educated separately or integrated into diverse classrooms reflects the American infatuation with the individual. As Walter Parker writes, “Multicultural education is integral and indispensable to the education of *democratic citizens*: people who are capable of democratic living, who want it, and who are determined to achieve it- to work toward the fuller realization of democratic ideals” (Parker 2003). Though educators and parents alike generally recognize inclusion’s potential for societal benefit, when push comes to shove, Americans are reluctant to compromise the real or imagined benefits to the individual that grouping provides.

Though it is important to have diversity in classrooms, simply having a diverse mix of students in classrooms is not sufficient for two reasons: 1) diversity without the proper interaction does not lead to mutual understanding and 2) parents will object to mixed classrooms that do not appear to cater to their child's needs. In an inclusive setting it becomes even more important to acknowledge and respond to the various capabilities of individual students. As psychologist Howard Gardner puts it, "Once one recognizes that children of different ages or stages have different needs, attend to different forms of cultural information, and assimilate content to different motivational and cognitive structures, then the kinds of educational regimens that we design ought to take into account these developmental factors"(Gardner 2006). This individual-centered education may, at first sound counter-productive to creating a stronger community, but recognizing and responding to differences is far removed from idiocy- in the Greek sense. "An individual-centered education is not one that is self-centered or narcissistic" argues Gardner, "Rather, it is an education that takes the differences among individuals very seriously. Educators attempt to learn as much as they can about the learning strengths and proclivities of each student. As far as possible educators make use of this information to craft the optimal education for each child" (Gardner 2006). In this view providing a tailored education for students is primarily up to teachers, parents, peers and the community to fill three roles: 1) an assessment role- to acquire information about which areas children are struggling, 2) a brokering role- to match student with curricula/assessment, electives, and best method of presenting curricula given a students ability profile, and 3) a school community broker role- to expose students and parents to vocational and other opportunities in the community that meet students intellectual

profiles (Gardner 2006). This attention to individual students may pacify objections to inclusion that parents might have otherwise, while the very fact that students are recognized as unique individuals necessitates a closer connection with teachers and peers.

There are, however some obvious roadblocks that must be considered carefully in designing this sort of education. If they are to operate as sociopolitical instruments, schools inevitably face the difficulty of recognizing differences of students while at the same time attempting to instill a set of values consistent with political necessity. As Eamonn Callan argues in *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy*,

Any morally defensible approach under pluralism must acknowledge *both* the necessity of some common education and the acceptability of at least certain kinds of separate education for those who would choose them. The necessity of a common education for all follows from the need to secure a sufficiently coherent and decent political culture and the prerequisites of a stable social order. The acceptability of at least some kinds of separate education follows from the need to respect the many different convictions and ways of life that flourish under pluralism and the divergent education aspirations that flow from these.

(Callan 1997)

Clearly education must acknowledge diverse views as well as further a common set of citizen values, but deciding where to strike the balance is a tricky proposition.

While it may be tempting to suggest that educators should acknowledge a variety of different viewpoints and focus on teaching students how to think critically to arrive at their own conclusions, this solution ignores the fact that education is inherently non-neutral. As Dianne Ratvitch and Joseph Viteritti note in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, “Education exerts a powerful indoctrinative force. The scope and direction of that force are largely a function of district policy, school practice and teacher discretion. In effect, this process potentially can undermine children’s autonomy by forcing them to choose a life contrary to that of their parents and

community. To acknowledge this reality is to reject the notion that education is an activity that expresses or nurtures a person's autonomy" (Ravitch and Viteritti 2001). Instead Ratvich and Viteritti suggest that schools cannot, and indeed should not place equal value on all beliefs (there are obvious moral dilemmas facing a school that must equally value the viewpoint of a child brought up to value the teachings of the Klu-Klux-Klan). However, schools should not permit indifference to beliefs either. They argue that, "Tolerance must be a two-way street between minority and majority values and beliefs, where the bottom line is set at mutuality and noncoercion and neither side is required to adopt the other's convictions as one's own." (Ravitch and Viteritti 2001).

Conclusions: Education for a Deeper Democracy

Children need more than education for civic competence. They need a moral and sentimental education, the type typically produced by such small social units as the family, the church, and the community. These constituent parts of civil society not only help the child achieve an integrated sense of self but further the ends of democracy and maintain a stable civic order.

-Dianne Ratvitch and Joseph Viteritti (Ravitch and Viteritti 2001)

American society suffers from being pulled in opposite directions- on the one hand the market economy, competition, materialism and growth reinforce the virtues of radical individualism while globalization, pluralism, and problems such as the environmental degradation, government disillusionment and voter apathy necessitate a more community-oriented worldview. Reshaping school classrooms to better integrate diverse viewpoints and create an individual-centered education sensitive to the unique learning profile of students that respectfully tolerates diversity of opinion will help to revitalize the values of intradependence and democracy in American society. However, as the excerpt from Ratvich and Viteritti stresses, education is but one venue to implement

change. However, because it is central to all young people, education has the peculiar power to proliferate ideas and reach other societal institutions. Thus, in reorienting the values of society, the schools are a good place to start.

Annotated List of Works Cited

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This book provides an extensive discussion of citizenship education. More specifically, there is a section titled "Common Schools, Separate Schools" that discusses the importance of separation/inclusion in citizenship education.

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Gardner's book, *Multiple Intelligences*, develops the idea of a pluralistic view of the mind that acknowledges that different minds have different cognitive strengths and weaknesses. In several chapters, Gardner discusses the implication of this view of the mind in the way that it should inform the educational practices of schools.

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As one of the texts for the class, this book provides an overview of several prominent issues facing public education today. The chapter on separation and inclusion provides a background for much of my analysis.

O'Neill, W. F. (1983). Rethinking education : selected readings in the educational ideologies. Dubuque, Iowa, Kendal/Hunt Pub. Co.

This book provides a comprehensive analysis of the whole range of educational ideologies. The first several chapters provide insight into the basis for education as a tool to promote differing political philosophies.

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Teaching Democracy is another one of the texts for the course and provides specific insight into educational practices to further the development to citizenship and away from "idiocy."

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Reeher, G. (1997). Education for citizenship : ideas and innovations in political learning. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

This book discusses the *ways* in which students can learn to become active citizenship and provides detailed recommendations for teaching approaches to enhance citizenship.

Vig, N. J. and M. E. Kraft (2006). Environmental policy : new directions for the twenty-first century. Washington, D.C., CQ Press.

This book is a definitive collection of essays on environmental policy from experts in the field. I have used one section to support the view that many environmental problems need to be addressed communally and collaboratively.

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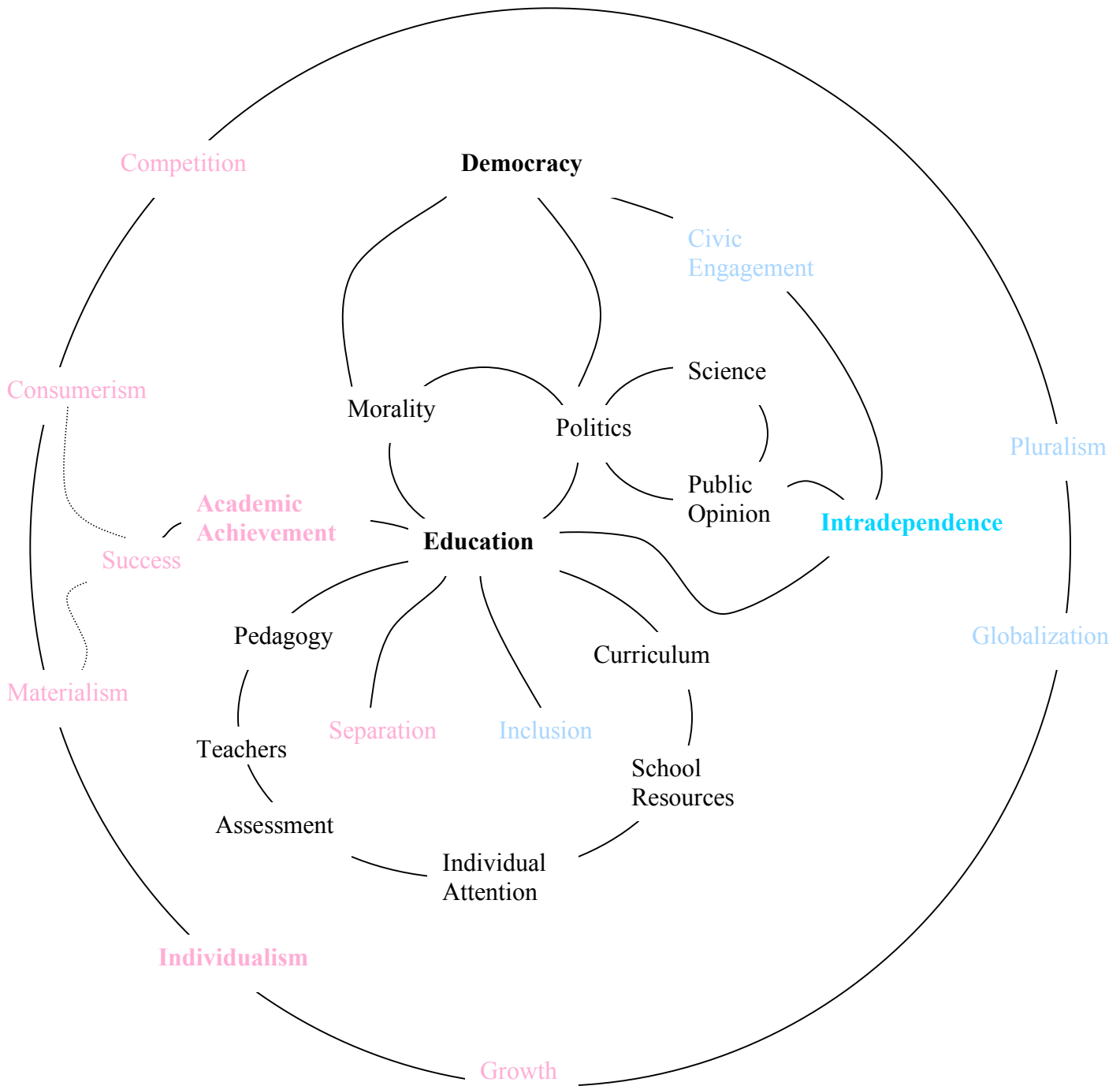
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The concept map above provides a visual representation of the interaction of various societal forces and institutions outlined in the following public intellectual essay. The colored text highlights the tension between the predominating forces that promote **Individualism** and conditions that facilitate or require the acknowledgement of **Intradependence**.