

# *Re-envisioning Education and Democracy*

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## *Dedication*

*To all who persist against the odds  
to broaden and deepen democracy  
to strengthen understanding and experience  
of compassion, truth, beauty, and justice  
in public schools and civic spaces.*

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## *Prelude*

The future of public education in a democracy is everyone's responsibility. Education and democracy are inextricably linked in American social thought and practice. The core values shared by those who espouse democratic public education merge with those who attempt to enact democratic politics. Institutions developed to serve public education and those designed to realize democratic governance reflect common aspirations and experience similar constraints.

Today, the fate of public education—and therefore, the future of our democracy—is at risk. Seemingly intractable problems and heated controversies persist. The economic and cultural turbulence generated by globalization has consequences at every level and every location of contemporary life. An array of recurrent crises painfully displays the resilience of authoritarianism, the increased salience of terrorism, the widening gap between rich and poor, the undiminished rate of environmental degradation, and the persistence of racial, ethnic, and religious intolerance.

This constellation of pervasive systemic crises affects all dimensions of our personal and social lives. Democratic aspirations are deeply challenged. Impassioned critique and rhetorical repetition of familiar core values in public discourse are insufficient. Public institutions at all levels struggle to cope, but coping alone is not enough. Comprehensive reform is required. Public education is a crucial site for systemic social transformation.

Most of what we conventionally take as 'public education' is implicitly and explicitly 'democratic politics.' From funding decisions, to the development of

graduation standards, to the organization of education into districts with locally elected school boards, to the curriculum and pedagogy employed within each classroom, political processes are enacted. Much of what we conventionally consider ‘democratic politics’ is teaching and learning. Positions are developed, justified, and presented; debated, compromised and sometimes implemented; always assessed and often reconsidered throughout all of the institutions of democracy.

Both public education and democratic governance are fiscally and ethically accountable to citizens. Both provide focal points for social criticism, advocacy, and reform. Both continually shape, challenge, and evolve complex approaches to power sharing—the essence of all politics. *So strong are the interdependencies that our efforts to glimpse new directions may be strengthened by treating education and democracy as one and the same.*

At the center of all democratic activity—from envisionment to enactment—is the intent to deepen and extend human potential. While expressed and interpreted in various ways throughout the American experience, the objective of democratic education, politics, and governance is to afford *all* people opportunities to pursue life with dignity, affiliation, and an ever-evolving sense of purpose and possibility.

The continuing struggle to construct policies, programs, and institutions to accomplish this, for all citizens, over the course of a lifetime, is the enduring challenge of a democratic society. This challenge is centered in public education. At the turn of the twentieth century, John Dewey argued that public schooling is a primary site of both peril and promise for revitalizing democracy and promoting social justice and compassion. His visionary assessment is even more compelling today.

Public education has become a large and complex system affecting all aspects of contemporary life. The majority of U.S. citizens are educated in public schools. Education is the largest budget item in all of the states and is perennially a central issue in local, state, and national politics. Public schooling is seen across the spectrum of ideologies as a significant social responsibility. Discussion and debate concerning specific objectives, content, and approaches to teaching and learning are prominent in public and private conversations at all levels. Public schools remain perhaps the *only* social institution that could be shaped to support and sustain purposeful interaction among citizens whose concerns and contributions vary by race, class, and cultural heritage.

More than any other social institution, public education mirrors the troubling array of global problems. Despite historic commitments to the contrary, public schools are increasingly segregated. Public support is diminishing as budget constraints and privatization drain vital resources. School policies and programs perpetuate segregation by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and academic performance as gaps in achievement and opportunity continue to grow. There is persistent violence among young people. There is deep demoralization among struggling students, their teachers, and parents. There is increasing stigmatization of specific schools serving lower achieving groups of students. There is evidence of diminishing student aspirations for life-long learning and civic participation necessary to sustain democracy.

Well documented in the literature, and disturbingly present in the hearts and minds of those committed to egalitarian education reform, is the concern that prevailing public policy is 'democratic' perhaps only in terms of the numbers of those who will be

affected. The majority of America's youth, along with the majority of American educators, will find their efforts to teach and learn deeply affected by the imposition of education reform initiatives that are philosophically and pragmatically authoritarian and divisive. The majority of American adults will find themselves relentlessly shaped as political spectators and consumers, rather than supported as active citizens.

Within this context, collectively we are called to address the question:

***Given challenging and uncertain times,  
how can we sustain comprehensive reform  
that supports broad-based participation  
in democratic processes of social inquiry and civic action?***

As one response, we offer this book as an invitation for continuing involvement in a complex social process that implicates education, politics, and governance—that of *re-envisioning education and democracy*.

To *re-envision*—to envision and then envision again—is to join with others in *imagining new possibilities and bringing these into existence*. The goal is to open new paths toward systemic progressive reform.

Re-envisioning is a radically *social* process. Although distinct and varied individual contributions are required, transformative visions cannot be advanced through the agency of one charismatic person, or bound by one influential perspective. The process of re-envisioning, like all forms of democratic living and learning, draws energy and insight when interaction, connection, and communion are sustained across dimensions of difference.

Re-envisioning is an intensely *creative* and *exploratory* process. It is not accomplished through careful construction of ‘best laid plans’ aimed at attaining certainty and control. Re-envisioning is instead experienced and evolved by preparing for, and

then acting on, informed and strategic *glimpses*. These brief and fleeting impressions—multi-modal and multi-sensory, incomplete and ambiguous, always in motion—offer potentials, but no definitive answers.

Re-envisioning is a profoundly *ethical* and *aesthetic* process, centered in prospects for social justice, compassion, reform, and renewal. Social movements are rarely motivated by commitments to narrow objectives aimed at solving specific problems. More often, they are compelled by *prophetic dispositions* that indicate pathways toward transformative change. Across time and cultures we are drawn to persons and processes, to ideas and images, that call us back to remember our highest principles and move us forward to respond with acts of integrity and grace. Recurrent themes of beauty and power—here mirrored in chapter titles—inspire, guide, and liberate collective vision and principled action.

Re-envisioning is a fundamental human capacity. Although accessible to all, it remains largely undeveloped and underutilized. In the process of writing this book, we have come to believe that the collective ability to realize shared aspirations for education and democracy can be significantly enhanced by integrating the process of re-envisioning along with other, more familiar, educational and political reform strategies.

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To deepen our experience and understanding of re-envisioning, and to provide varied points of entry and engagement for our readers, we utilize three expressive forms. Within each chapter, one episode of an evolving *strategic narrative* is played out and followed by an *exploratory essay*. Key concepts raised in each essay are supported and extended by *thematic references* at the end of each chapter. Woven throughout each

chapter is a poetic stream that draws its form and function from varied conceptions of *oracles* developed historically and cross-culturally.

***Strategic Narratives:*** A complex story line depicting reform challenges and possibilities is developed throughout the book. A purposeful narrative provides several distinctive opportunities for critical analysis and policy design. Visionary abstractions can be tested in real-life contexts that portray divergent images, voices, emotions, and events always present in democratic deliberation. Situational descriptions and dialogue on complex issues can extend consideration and conversation among readers. Carefully constructed narratives can represent less linear and narrowly rational processes along with more ambiguous and conflicted experiences characteristic of all aspects of civic life.

***Exploratory Essays:*** Short essays are used to present glimpses of analyses and arguments linked to each chapter narrative. We understand an essay to be an interpretive composition. For the purposes of this project, the essay's function is neither principally persuasive nor prescriptive. We do not attempt to develop compelling cases or finely crafted arguments to advance specific positions or policies. Instead, we feature the tentative and exploratory characteristics of this expressive form. In each essay, we draw from the extensive literature of theory, research, criticism, and practice to prompt consideration of focal concepts and issues. Supporting references are provided at the end of each chapter.

***Oracular Expressions:*** Brief meditations in the oracular tradition frame the essays and narratives. These are used to mark the book's priorities and preferred strategies for advocacy and action. They emphasize key concepts and relationships by foreshadowing, sometimes echoing, their expression in the narratives and essays. Our

primary intent in adapting the metaphor of ‘oracle’ is not to advance expertise in prediction and planning. Education, politics, and governance are already replete with predictive technologies. Instead, we weave a five-part oracle throughout each chapter to support efforts to imagine and enact civic visions that are possible to sustain even under challenging circumstances. Oracular expressions are also included to draw attention to the interplay among intuitive, aesthetic, emotional, kinesthetic, and ethical dimensions of educational policy and practice. In doing so, we invite exploration of what we have come to understand as a *spiritual* domain of democratic learning and life.

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Throughout the writing process, we have struggled with the realization that each of the three expressive forms—narrative, essay, and oracle—could be developed as a literary art. Though a daunting and desirable goal, from the beginning we have known that this could not be our purpose. Our initial intentions were pragmatic and pedagogic. We wanted to develop multiple points of entry for a broad range of readers. We hoped to enhance communication by expressing key concepts in different formats. As the writing proceeded, however, we came to realize that much more was in play. Beyond their use as expressive strategies, narrative, essay, and oracle have functioned as distinctive yet complementary ‘ways of knowing’. Each form repeatedly challenged and extended our awareness, our understanding, and our aspirations.

Our primary goal has been to develop a book that will encourage creative but practical contributions to reform discourse and initiatives. In approaching this goal we first needed to formulate a credible reform scenario. *Narrative*, as a form of inquiry, pushed us to delve into prior research, teaching, and consulting to identify prominent

issues, acknowledge a variety of troubling situations, and anticipate likely barriers. Perhaps more importantly, crafting a *strategic narrative* repeatedly challenged us to ground our visionary and theoretical aspirations in contexts of real world constraint and patterns of feasible response. As in real life, the issues encountered in constructing a narrative drew us into the bewildering complexity of systemic reform. This narrative with its terse situational descriptions, sparse character development, and emphasis on dialogue still touches many conflicting and dynamic possibilities.

*Exploratory essay*, as a mode of inquiry, better meets the need to move beyond a specific story to clarify complex conceptual patterns and articulate broadly relevant and transferable solution paths. The glimpses that permeated our emerging understanding were grounded in broadly interdisciplinary scholarship. The essays provide composite representations of problems and possibilities rather than well-formed arguments or detailed examples. Exploratory essays reflect an approach to inquiry that is tentative, multi-layered, and dynamic.

As the book project proceeded, we found that the narratives and essays, while illuminating, were not sufficiently evocative. The complexities of educational and political reform require integration of intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic sensibilities. The *oracle* was initially attempted as a metaphoric frame, but soon provided a deeper conceptual structure and inquiry path. Its poetic and meditative style encouraged juxtaposition of disparate symbols and values, while eliciting aesthetic dimensions more difficult to represent in the essays and narratives. We discovered that the oracle's paradoxical tradition of broadening perspective, while focusing attention on issues of profound significance, offered distinctive insights into contemporary situations. The

prophetic dispositions, used as chapter titles, provided a vocabulary signaling common feeling states and critical experiences associated with the developmental stages of real world initiatives. Reform is intrinsically future-oriented and the oracle also allowed us to better understand how we conceive of and move toward visions of the common good. Overall, the characteristically diffuse aesthetic quality of oracular expression extended our inquiry and shaped our advocacy.

Although different in conceptual and communicative strategy, our experience suggests that narrative, expository, and prophetic/poetic ways of knowing—particularly in combination—are well suited to the task of engaging diverse participants in processes of re-envisioning education and democracy. The integrated use of these forms is intended to serve both conceptual and civic purposes.

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All chapters reflect a basic structure. Each begins with a one-word title followed by a meditation on its meaning. Based upon their central function, we use these key words as prophetic dispositions. Reflective of the prophetic tradition, they signal conditions of consequence; those worthy of broad-based, ethically centered, and future-oriented social deliberation. More than focal concepts, each represents a generative *field* for contemplation and action. Taken together, they mark the book's conceptual framework.

A narrative passage then follows. These are intended to support increased reader participation. Engaged readers usually enhance any story as they move through the text. Active readers embellish portrayals and situations with their own interpretations. They connect webs of imagined events, thoughts, and dialogue with their experiences and

emotions. They reflect on possible applications in their own lives. Our strategic intention is to encourage and support all of these tendencies.

Each chapter narrative encompasses a second oracular feature—a brief meditation on *forces* at play in systemic reform. Here we seek insight into the kinesthetic, emotional, and sensory ‘feel’ of the energy associated with the chapter’s prophetic disposition and story line. Often linked to recurrent patterns in the natural world, this feature draws from the reflective prompts represented within several historically recognized oracular traditions. Emphasizing non-verbal symbolism, this feature invites interaction with important educational and political concepts in ways that move beyond conventional linguistic and logical analysis.

Each narrative concludes with a *query*—a complex question to be brought before the oracle. Historically, the opportunity to consult an oracle was accepted with grave responsibility. It was well understood that the nature of the question posed would shape both the quality and direction of the oracle’s counsel. Informed by skilled perception of the field and the forces involved, the query was to move to the heart of the issue thus opening the way for fruitful patterns of response. In this book, we offer ten chapter queries to our readers, first for consideration in light of their own perspective; but then, more importantly, as catalysts for conversation with concerned others.

The chapter essay is then developed. Prompted by the oracle, these are structured to center attention on issues that both necessitate comprehensive response and open new directions for change. Connecting with the chapter narrative, the essays are intended to identify major problems, provide selected examples, and develop interpretations of research and commentary.

Contained within each essay is the fourth feature of our adapted oracular metaphor—a *response* suggesting one possible path for social reflection and reform. Similar to the chapter field, the response is framed as a prophetic disposition. Corresponding to each chapter query, we offer ten responses as invitations to extend public discourse and activism concerning challenges and opportunities facing contemporary schools and society.

Each chapter essay concludes with a *reflection*. Here we draw from the contributions of others whose meditations on similar themes have yielded eloquent expression. This fifth oracular feature emphasizes our belief that in order to be effective, the process of re-envisioning must connect and sustain approaches to inquiry, imagination, and advocacy that are profoundly social.

Comprehensive reform is a daunting aspiration. Given the barriers to enacting progressive visions in large, resource-constrained, bureaucratic and authoritarian systems, we offer our readers two additional resources. Following each chapter is an *Exploratory Democratic Practice*—a technique that opens opportunities to construct and apply knowledge in a holistic, consensual, and strategic manner. Each practice is designed to support collective efforts to experience and evolve vibrant democratic processes in classroom and community settings. Aligned with the book’s strategic narrative that traces the ‘life cycle’ of a systemic reform initiative, exploratory democratic practices are distributed across the chapters in a developmental sequence. A brief description and rationale for each technique is accompanied by suggestions for its implementation.

Also linked to each chapter is a collection of *Thematic Bibliographic References*. Chapter essays explore concerns central to the task of systemic progressive reform.

References are selected to ground and extend key positions raised. Included are the print based sources that most directly shaped our understanding, and those we judge to be most useful to others engaged in processes of re-envisioning.

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By altering our familiar patterns of understanding, discourse, and participation we *can* move beyond education, politics, and governance “as usual”. This book is presented as an invitation to participate in re-envisioning education and democracy—to join in a continuous process that is *radically social, always exploratory, necessarily creative, inherently aesthetic, and profoundly ethical.*

*Imagination is the means for going beyond our selves as presently formed, moving transformatively toward imagined ideals of what we might become, how we might relate to others, and how we might address problematic situations. Moral imagination is our capacity to see and to realize in some actual or contemplated experience possibilities for enhancing the quality of experiences, both for ourselves and for the communities of which we are a part, both for the present and for future generations.*

Mark Johnson

*Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*

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