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Educating for Democracy: The Vital Role of the Language Arts Teacher

According to Corinne Mantle-Bromley and Ann M. Foster, English language arts teachers more than any others help students to connect skills they learn in school with the larger purposes of democracy. Therefore, they contend, “the future of our nation depends at least in part on the commitment of our current language arts teachers toward democracy and social justice.”

By the year 2050, today’s secondary school students will live in a country that is far more crowded and diverse than the United States is now.¹ Decisions about resources, from oil to water to farmland, will become even more complex. Current transportation systems will be insufficient, new diseases will surface, world economic powers will have shifted, and deadlier weapons will have been developed.

The task of living together and governing ourselves—this ongoing experiment we call *democracy*—has always been difficult and flawed. Groups outside the dominant culture can tell painful histories of oppression, discrimination, and denial of rights, many in the name of democracy. Democratic processes have been and continue to be used toward undemocratic ends, resulting in numerous inequities in our society. The picture we have posited is only one side of the proverbial coin—and, as it turns out, the depressing side. But democracy has also served as a powerful vehicle for dismantling inequities and improving society. If our nation is to solve tomorrow’s complex problems (and ameliorate today’s), language arts teachers must help prepare today’s students to do so.

The more positive side of the coin also makes democracy difficult. As a national culture, we cherish our freedoms and our individual rights; we constitutionally protect the individual. Our work of living together is a constant balancing act of extending freedoms to individuals and vigilantly protecting those freedoms while acting as responsible members of the numerous groups to which we belong—groups in neighborhoods, cities, states, the nation, and the world. Our freedoms are only as strong as our will-

ingness to regulate and educate ourselves for those freedoms.

Are we preparing our nation’s young people for the hard work ahead of them? Will they know how to use their increasing diversity as a valuable tool for sustainable decision making or will they, instead, fear that diversity? Will they be wise consumers of science and technology or will they fall prey to it? Will tomorrow’s citizens—the nation’s decision-makers—be able to sift and sort through masses of new information and accumulated knowledge, or will it overwhelm them? Will they communicate clearly and respectfully with those who are different from them? Will they use skills of negotiation and compromise ethically and toward the greater good of society?

It may sound dramatic to state so simply, but the future of our nation depends at least in part on the commitment of our current language arts teachers toward democracy and social justice. We must take seriously the responsibility to educate our nation’s children for their *public responsibilities*.

The challenges to our social and political systems are many and, of course, the burden of preparing students for these challenges cannot and does not rest solely on language arts teachers. That said, a wise future citizenry depends significantly on skills, knowledge, and dispositions acquired in language arts classrooms today.

Literacy and Education for Democracy

Language arts teachers are charged with the transmission of cultures through literature, the promotion of thoughtful discourse through language develop-

ment, and the development of analytical thought through critique of the written word. And, although there are many other aspects to this complex work, these features are fundamental to the discipline and to our democracy.

Today, this work is defined in the educational language of standards, where the holistic purposes for communication are divided into discrete parts that often read as separate language communication skills. However, embedded in the various lists of knowledge and skills (delineated for each grade level) is an underlying premise: Reading is a primary gateway to the world of knowledge and connections. The “Wisconsin Model Academic Standards for English Language Arts,” for example, include in the rationale for reading standards the following: “Society regards reading as essential to daily living” (ELA Standard A, par. 2). These and other state standards emphasize the need for students to critically analyze, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate a variety of literatures. Many of the standards also indicate that reading will *build on* and *build up* students’ background knowledge, further expanding students’ understandings of familiar and new areas.

Language arts teachers must make these truncated standards-based expectations come alive for students. Teachers diligently focus on the required skills and knowledge that have been agreed on as most critical. But to what end? Because they are trendy or fashionable, as suggested by popular celebrities in recent public-service ads? Because an admired movie star says they are a good idea? Schools celebrate the test-score gains resulting from the hard work of teachers and students; results are reported in the media. However, in the larger community—including the media—there is little discussion of how students will use these skills outside of school. As a society, we fall short of connecting literacy competency with the larger public purpose of schools, with how students will apply their learning to day-to-day habits that support the public good.

One need not look too far to see the problem with this skills-as-an-end environment in which we find ourselves. Individuals from Enron, Arthur Andersen, and WorldCom, for example, have all demonstrated that literacy skills can be and are used toward unethical business practices that increase the wealth of a few at the expense of many.

Sadly, the emphasis on raising test scores of the students who are struggling in our schools, without asking openly and often to what end, can result in students’ getting a few more answers correct on a test and still not seeing how their lives will be improved. Language arts teachers are a critical link between the current skills-based emphasis in schools and students connecting these skills with the larger collective purpose that this democracy serves. Although we are far from the ideals put forth in the Constitution, we gain ground through an educated populace, and language arts courses, content, and teachers are instrumental in defining what constitutes an educated populace. Language arts knowledge and skills—and the ability to apply them—provide students with the foundation to participate as wise stewards of the complex enterprise called the United States of America.

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Staten Island Ferry #1, © 2004 by Robert Welsh. Courtesy of Tepper Takayama Fine Arts.

Every day teachers make decisions regarding the types of texts that students will use, the poetry they will hear and read, the language patterns and vocabulary that will form discussions, the way each student will be acknowledged as a reader, how a student's choice of a writing topic will be treated, and the feedback provided on assignments. These are examples of the decisions that teachers make, often with little or no acknowledgement that they are teaching *for* democracy.

The messages students receive about their work, effort, and engagement shape their attitudes about themselves as learners, and nothing is more fundamental to a well-educated populace than citizens who have a mindset to learn. These and a myriad of other decisions have profound impact on students' preparation for democracy. Language arts teachers have long included peer readers and reviewers, Socratic Seminar-type interaction with texts, cooperative groups, and writing rubrics. Each of these strategies can teach democratic skills and dispositions. When teachers acknowledge and encourage student voice and responsibility, they help to prepare students for engaged citizenry.

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Students learn to trust one another, listen with care and empathy, disagree respectfully, and use feedback to refine and improve their work. They learn what it feels like to be treated fairly by peers and teachers. These are vital lessons in a student's life.

Language arts teachers make critical decisions about what texts their students will read. Will these selections help students gain multicultural understanding—so necessary in a diverse democracy? A well-produced and disturbing documentary, *Daughter from Danang*, traces an adopted Amerasian's journey to find her birth mother in Vietnam. She set about this journey without any background in the Vietnamese culture or history, no understanding of the Vietnam War, no sense of daily life in Vietnam, no Vietnamese language skills. When she met her Vietnamese family members, she became discouraged, distant, and angry over their expectations of her. She wanted nothing more than to forget the experience and reenter her comfortable and comforting American life. This

young woman's schooling did little to help her prepare for such a journey. Literature has the potential to broaden and deepen students' understandings of their own and others' cultures. These understandings are fundamental to living in a multicultural democracy.

Sometimes teachers must first address the common habits of schooling that are prevalent and accepted throughout the schooling culture to make school a challenging experience that simultaneously supports democratic skill development. These habits, engrained in student and teacher behavior, often support supervision and control rather than democratic skill development. In a recent discussion, middle school language arts teachers were reflecting on the use of the active learning concepts recommended by Paideia Schools.² The teachers were perplexed about how to work students through the first stage of seminar participation: entering conversation by observation and care for the whole rather than by raising one's hand.

Students voicing their thoughts to one another without the artificial "permission" from the teacher (traditionally requiring raising one's hand for permission to speak) was turning out to be a difficult habit to enact. The teachers were discussing the levels of success that they had had to date. One teacher noted that they were trying to undo years of practice and reinforcement for themselves as teachers and their students as learners. The group realized that sometimes the most obvious and embedded conventions of schooling get in the way of helping students gain the skills they will need as adults to contribute to learning communities. More specifically for this group of language arts teachers, they found it difficult to attain their goal of developing student leadership and responsibility—transitioning to student voice as the predominant voice in the classroom.

Language arts teachers expose students to literature and thought that reflect a wide range of experiences. They model and teach skills needed to discuss issues of race and justice with diverse groups, build on students' understandings of culture and identity, and formulate questions that make students think about the authors' assumptions and purposes and the contexts in which the works were constructed. These kinds of activities contribute enormously to the development of students'

critical-thinking skills, modeling democratic skills and processes and ultimately preparing students to be civically engaged.

In the teaching profession, we are challenged to make content relevant to students. The language arts provide ample opportunity to build critical background knowledge that can be converted into pragmatic and immediate use. Language arts can help students make informed decisions about many aspects of their lives, lessen social distance among students from different backgrounds, promote school policy changes, and bring to light school inequities. Quality literature is a powerful tool in the hands of quality teachers. Teachers guide students through controversial material, unfamiliar texts, difficult vocabulary, and a range of writing patterns. Teachers prod and push students to think about multiple points of view, search for the reasons behind actions, understand the characters and their circumstances, look beyond the surface text and, ultimately, learn about themselves and others.

Education for Democracy

Language arts teachers, of course, work in a particular school with values and a culture that interact with those of the surrounding district and community. And local schooling occurs in a larger national context of schooling expectations, aspirations, and challenges.

Senior associates of John I. Goodlad's Institute for Educational Inquiry (IEI) studying these local and national contexts have focused their work on the role of schools in a democracy for more than a dozen years.³ Describing the challenge, authors John I. Goodlad, Corinne Mantle-Bromley, and Stephen John Goodlad concluded that "[c]reating a technology to explore outer space that includes the necessary human expertise is a piece of cake compared to forging the infrastructure necessary to accomplish a culture's most exalted moral educational mission—sustaining a wise citizenry" (4–5).

Staff at the IEI work to define, develop, and support implementation of what they call the "Agenda for Education in a Democracy" (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad 10). Their four-part mission is shared by school–university partnership members of the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER). All involved work toward four common outcomes: teaching students democratic

knowledge, skills, and dispositions; ensuring equity and access for all children in all schools; developing educators who nurture students' individual talents in a democratic context; and ensuring that all educators act as good stewards of our nation's schools.

Schools are not the only places where adolescents learn democratic skills and dispositions; this learning can also occur in their homes, their communities, and their churches. Schools, however, are the *only* place we can guarantee this learning. And as Benjamin R. Barber reminded us, educating for democracy is both unnatural and vital to our future: "Democracy," he wrote, "is not a natural form of association; it is an extraordinary and rare contrivance of cultivated imagination. Empower the merely ignorant and endow the uneducated with a right to make collective decisions and what results is not democracy but, at best, mob rule" (5).

The work clearly demands a whole-school approach that is supported by the district. But language arts teachers play a special role. Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad explain the unique contribution that language arts teachers make toward this public mission of schools:

[W]hile most modern societies may want their schools to produce "literate" people, a democracy demands a special kind of literacy that goes beyond merely comprehending words on a page or adding up columns of figures. It requires a literacy that includes such skills as critical inquiry; knowing how to ask questions and what kinds of questions need to be asked in a given circumstance; knowing how to evaluate the legitimacy and accuracy of an argument and the data that accompany it, to view issues from a variety of perspectives, and to evaluate the implications of a given text, read between the lines, and recognize and understand the unstated, the omitted, the subtext. In other words, literacy in a democracy is not only a special kind of literacy; it is also a more complex kind of literacy. And because of its uniqueness and its importance, teaching literacy in a democracy has a different kind of moral dimension than, say, teaching literacy under an authoritarian regime. (8–9)

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Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad challenge schools to contribute to developing a thoughtful public, where “citizens . . . protect their individual and collective rights and freedoms . . . [and] understand how those rights and freedoms play out in reality” (39). “A public” does not imply one voice or one outlook; rather, it underscores the importance of all voices and the mutual learning that comes from rich conversation—conversation that invites individuals to open their minds to the experiences of others. Once again, we find ourselves in the midst of what language arts teachers do daily by teaching students that simply reading to regurgitate facts or incidental observations from texts is not enough. They must make their own meaning of others’ words. This is fundamental to language arts instruction from the beginning of school through graduate courses.

As ninth-grade students peel away layers of ethics, morality, and culture in *The Scarlet Letter*, or tenth-grade students explore sacrifice and friendship in *A Tale of Two Cities*, language arts teachers guide their students in respectful and thoughtful disagreement with one another’s points of view, require that opinion is based on understanding the text, and find alternative ways for students to express their views. They ensure that all students know that their contributions are important. Once again, these lessons, *when made transparent to students*, contribute to students’ abilities to engage in democratic processes as thoughtful citizens.

If we prepare students for their public life, they will be able to examine assumptions and biases in the media, for example. They will be able to critique and assess the value of information. They will look for the logic behind arguments. They will be able to discuss difficult issues with diverse groups.

These examples serve only as a sample of language arts teachers’ contributions to students’ development toward wise citizenry. And we have limited our discussion primarily to the teaching of reading and literature. Written and oral communication skills are also essential to effective participa-

tion in democracy. Language arts teachers are fundamental to the transmission of democracy from generation to generation and, more immediately, from school to the larger surroundings in which our young people live. The knowledge and skills students gain or do not gain in their language arts classrooms contribute to the kind of society they and future generations will experience. While language arts teachers enrich their students’ “today’s,” their work is vital to their students’ tomorrows. Each skill taught and connected to other skills, each concept taught and connected to other concepts, and each word of encouragement spoken build students’ futures as literate, thoughtful, and compassionate citizens.

Notes

1. The US Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050 the US population will have increased by more than 42 percent, from 295 to 420 million people. By that same year, the Census Bureau projects that the white population percentage will drop from 69 percent to 50 percent (“Population”).

2. See the National Paideia Center’s Web site at <http://www.paideia.org>.

3. Many other organizations are working toward this goal as well. See, for example, the following Web sites: Institute for Educational Inquiry at <http://depts.washington.edu/cedren/IEI.htm>; First Amendment Schools at <http://www.firstamendmentschools.org>; Project Citizen at <http://www.civiced.org> or <http://www.ncsl.org>; and the National Paideia Center at <http://www.paideia.org>.

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