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**Two Narratives in Search of Educational Policy:  
The Case for Virtue and Democratic Schooling**

Gary D Fenstermacher

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A Presentation to the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the  
BYU-Public School Partnership

Let's begin with an exercise in imagination. Imagine that you have been nominated to be the U.S. Secretary of Education. As you prepare for your confirmation hearing, you know that you will be asked what you believe is the most important problem facing American education today. As an experienced educator, you are aware that you have a choice between two narratives that have historically framed the nature and purpose of education in a democratic society—narratives that have long served as the basis for determining what's right and what's wrong about schooling in America. Which narrative will you choose?

You can't answer the question until you know the narratives? Given your experience in American education, I think you already know them. Then again, perhaps just one of them occurs to you, as it is the one we hear discussed most frequently in state legislatures, governor's offices, Congressional committees, and school boards. It is the narrative of success. This narrative describes how schools can prepare the young to be successful adults. Today the success narrative appears primarily in economic form, expressed as the requirements for good jobs, reasons for staying in school, and for improving the nation's standing in international assessments.

The second narrative, the one that may not have occurred to you, is the virtue narrative. This narrative encompasses three primary virtues: justice, integrity, and compassion. Each of

these three is surrounded by a constellation of related and connected virtues. The justice constellation includes fairness, equality, and discernment; integrity includes honesty, trust, forthrightness, responsibility and dependability; the compassion constellation covers caring, love, selflessness, and empathy. The virtue narrative incorporates those habits of mind and conduct that are among the most noble qualities of the human species. In addition, this narrative marks off characteristics essential to the preservation and advancement of democracy in America.

With these brief descriptions in mind, let's return to your Senate confirmation. Which narrative will you choose to present, the success narrative or the virtue narrative? My sense is that if you choose the success narrative, you will breeze through the confirmation hearing (assuming, of course, you do not make any blunders on the status of charter and voucher schools, on what beverages should be dispensed in school vending machines, whether it is permissible for teachers to have guns in the classroom, and the controversy over evolution and creationism). On the other hand, if you choose the virtue narrative you are most likely to face a difficult and awkward interrogation. If I am correct in this assessment, it is worth our while to explore why the virtue narrative is problematic while the success narrative seems such a no-brainer.

Why would it not surprise us if a nominee for Secretary of Education espouses the success narrative, while we would most likely react with surprise, perhaps even shock, to hear a nominee embrace the virtue narrative? I can think of a number of factors that might be at work here. One is that the virtue narrative has been practically extinguished by the unrelenting and overwhelming attention given to the success narrative. Another possibility is that the virtue narrative is simply taken for granted, such that it is assumed to be a key factor in education and thus need not be the center of national attention. A third possibility is the reverse of the second:

The virtue narrative is dismissed from consideration because it poses hazards for public schooling. Among these hazards are that it could too easily become an entry point for religious sectarianism to enter the public school, that it might too easily be commandeered by extreme ideological groups for their own narrow purposes, or that it distracts from the success narrative, thereby weakening the grip of that narrative on the formation and enforcement of educational policy.

There is a fourth possibility, one that seems far more freighted with consequence than any of the first three. It is that so many of those engaged in the national conversation about educational policy and practice appear unaware of how central and essential the virtue narrative is to not only the proper education of the young, but also to the preservation and advancement of democracy. Just in case I spoke that last sentence too quickly, it bears repeating: Too many of those engaged with educational policy and practice seem unaware that the virtue narrative is essential to the proper education of the young *and* the maintenance of an effective democracy. Much of the rest of my presentation is devoted to explaining, defending, and expanding on this claim.

I could begin this exploration with a defense of the virtue narrative as the indispensable ingredient in the proper education of the young. But I doubt that claim needs much of a defense with this audience. So let's pursue the other angle: That the virtue narrative is essential to the preservation and advancement of democracy. As practiced in America, democracy is not simply a form of governance; it is also a way of life. That is, the term 'democracy' is not only the name we give to identify our system of government it is also describes many of the core principles governing human intercourse. John Dewey expressed this important aspect of democracy in his

justly famous work, *Democracy and Education*. In what may be the most oft-quoted passage from that work, Dewey writes:

The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact. The superficial explanation is that a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated. . . . But there is a deeper explanation. A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. (1919, p. 101).

One sees this dual character when setting two primary treatises on American democracy side by side. *The Federalist Papers* are a superb rendering of how democracy might operate as a form of government; on the other hand, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is a powerful and penetrating analysis of how democracy functions as a form of social life, as what Dewey calls "a mode of associated living." It is this "thick" culture of local associations, clubs, boards, congregations and organizations that both enables and supports a society embarked on democratic governance. Without this thick culture it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to achieve the level of popular sovereignty and social life that currently characterizes American democracy.

The democracy to which Americans have grown accustomed is difficult to achieve. Indeed, some have argued that it is damnably difficult to achieve. The political theorist Benjamin Barber (1992) called it "an extraordinary and rare contrivance of cultivated imagination" (p. 5) Consider for a moment the incredible challenge of vesting the people with the power to rule. We too often forget what a phenomenal sea change this concept was in the evolution of the human species. Until just a few hundred years ago it was virtually impossible to conceive of a tribe,

society, or country of any significant size vesting in its people the power to rule. As profound a change as this was, there is much more to it than simply asserting that the people are sovereign.

American democracy also incorporates a set of truths that are regarded as self-evident, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To realize these noble truths means bestowing on each person the right to determine not only the destiny of his country but—now get this—his own destiny. What is being expressed in these words from the *Declaration of Independence* is the inherent liberty of each person to seek his or her own version of the good life. In short, upon each citizen is bestowed not only the power to determine the destiny of her country, but her own destiny as a person.

As my teenage grandchildren might say, “That’s awesome, dude.” Yet consider the enormous potential for disaster that accompanies the idea that each of us has a right to the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. When you pause a moment to ponder the idea, it looks like a recipe for bedlam—even anarchy. How crazy is the idea of conferring on each and every person a right—a divine right at that—to choose his or her own version of happiness and while doing so, have a hand on the nation’s steering wheel? Suppose, for example, that my liberty and happiness come from bilking senior citizens of their savings, or humiliating persons on the Internet, or bundling risky home mortgages and selling them as securities with potential for great profit. What if my happiness arises from lying, bullying, or cheating?

In other words, how is it possible to form a union that, first, assures each person of the right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness and then, second, actually functions so that these values can be enacted by one person in a way that does not unduly restrict their enactment by others? Even more vexing, how are these enactments adjudicated so that all persons can

participate in a common good while simultaneously pursuing their own individual goods? What an extraordinary, complex, incredibly difficult problem this is. How remarkable that a nation not yet out of diapers set out to solve it. And even more remarkable that it has managed to pursue the solution with surprising success, though to be fair, some rather horrible errors and failures. How did we pull it off?

There are most likely a number of correct answers to this question. Within this set of correct answers there is one that must certainly be foundational. It is the virtue narrative. America made it work because of its powerful commitment to justice, integrity and compassion, and the constellations of virtues connected to these three. There is a lengthy defense in support of this claim but I have a suspicion that you forgive me for not engaging it here. Instead, let's take a look at the quick, simple version. To understand how and why American democracy works you need ponder but three little words: polite, policy and police. *Politeness* is acting in consideration of and with respect for others. *Policy* expresses in codified form the principles and laws that govern human intercourse and relationships in public space. *Police* are what you see when you fail at politeness and policy. The cultivation of politeness combined with the careful balancing of policy and police offer insight into how America manages democracy as both a form of government and a way of life. To manage effectively, however, the functions expressed by our three little words must be exercised in accord with moral standards. It should come as no surprise at this point that the three primary standards for being polite, enacting policy, and enforcing the law are justice, integrity and compassion. The virtue narrative is the guide and the judge for how polite, policy and police are enacted in a democratic society.

Thus there is an essential, powerful, and intimate relationship between democracy and virtue. Democracy as a form of government and a way of life cannot succeed in the absence of virtue. Virtue structures and regulates the vast range of interests and interactions among citizens that must occur when sovereignty is vested in the people themselves and where each person is given an entitlement to pursue his or her own version of the good life. When one sees the virtue narrative in monarchs, oligarchs, and aristocrats it is an option, and a gift to those governed. In democracy, on the other hand, virtue is not a gift, not an option; it is an essential and defining condition.

I hope I have succeeded in defending the vital link between democracy and virtue. Assuming that I have, a new question arises: Where and how is virtue acquired? If you've had even a smattering of philosophy you know that this question is one of the central questions of philosophy. It was asked by Aristotle and Plato, by Aquinas, Rousseau, and Kant, and many more of philosophy's greats, both Eastern and Western. It continues to be a hot topic in contemporary philosophy and is of special interest in the philosophy of education. Though the acquisition of virtue remains a challenging question in philosophy, there are some things I believe we can reasonably assert and defend about where and how it is acquired.

In answer to the where, I doubt there would be much debate over these three venues: home, church, and school. Parents, clergy and teachers are our first tutors in virtue. When it comes to preparing the young for democratic citizenship, however, the school and its teachers move to the forefront. As such, the school is not only a tutor in virtues that foster harmony in the classroom and a proper regard for the teacher and one's fellow students, it is the tutor for those virtues that make democracy work. The school is a critically important site for readying the

young to undertake the search for their own happiness while engaging in governance as citizens. This preparation involves far more than studies of American history and civics. It involves laying the groundwork for and encouraging the development of justice, integrity and compassion. How do teachers do this?

The best way I know to explain how the virtue narrative might unfold in the classroom is to lean on the work of one of BYU's own alums, Richard Osguthorpe, and his colleague, Matthew Sanger. An article in which I collaborated with Osguthorpe and Sanger (2009) explores a fascinating distinction between teaching morally and teaching morality. In teaching morally teachers are instructing in ways that exemplify their own moral and ethical traits. In contrast, when teaching morality, teachers are offering specific instruction in conduct, as when a school adopts a character education curriculum or when teachers call out students for breaches in moral conduct (as would occur when a teacher chastises a student for looking over another student's shoulder during an examination). This example of cheating offers us a simple way to distinguish teaching morally from teaching morality: when teaching morally, teachers themselves do not cheat; when teaching morality, teachers demand that their students do not cheat.

On first hearing it, this distinction may seem as if it does not amount to much of a difference. To think so is to miss something very important about how the moral dimensions of teaching become manifest in the classroom. Teachers, like parents, may—and most likely do—hold their students to a higher standard of moral conduct than they hold themselves. In other words, teachers may set a higher bar for teaching morality than for teaching morally. That is not so unusual when an adult relates to a child in an instructional or developmental capacity. The adult seeks to cultivate in the child a set of capabilities and understandings that are more likely to

be nourished when expecting the child to comply with standards of conduct that often slip when adults interact with one another. It's a variation on that old saw, "Do what I say, not what I do."

At the same time, there cannot be too much divergence between the moral conduct of the teacher and the teacher's demand for moral conduct by his or her students. Students detect such discrepancies with uncanny quickness and typically respond to it by discounting the teacher or pretending to attend when they are not. Hence the teacher who seeks standards of moral conduct on the part of his students has to possess and exhibit a certain standard of conduct himself. Put another way, the teacher who asks students to attend to and work on their conduct must also work on her own conduct—in much the same way as a teacher who would teach history or science must herself achieve a level of proficiency in these subjects.

It's important not get lost here in thinking that the virtue narrative pertains only to grand moral ideals. Justice, integrity and compassion are considerations infused in just about everything a teacher does in the classroom. Consider turn-taking; it is a way to ensure fairness in student participation. Consider the prohibition against cheating; it is an aspect of integrity. Consider the requirement that students not ridicule differences in physical agility among their peers; it is a way to promote compassion and justice. Consider assigning grades, particularly when you make a judgment that a student of lesser ability, exerting greater effort, should receive as high a mark as the student of higher ability, even though the less able student did not score as well; here you are balancing considerations of fairness and compassion. Consider taking points off for late or undone assignments; here you are engaged with responsibility and dependability—virtues associated with integrity. Almost everything a teacher does in the classroom carries moral

freight, and reflects both the moral character of the teacher as well as the teacher's expectations for the moral conduct of his students.

In this regard you might be interested in some research that Virginia Richardson and I did while at the University of Michigan. We studied the ways elementary school teachers either fostered or inhibited the moral development of their students. We learned a great deal from this research, including a finding that probably should not have surprised us, but did. Most teachers we studied saw their moral efforts and impact not as moral work but as rules and procedures for organizing their classrooms and making things run smoothly. They did not take note of the extensive moral freight carried by these rules and procedures and hence seldom explored them in much depth—either as reflections of their own moral character or as facilitators or inhibitors of the moral development of their students.

In a surprising twist to this finding, the teachers who recognized the moral features of their work hardly ever mentioned being concerned about classroom management or discipline. These teachers viewed their classrooms as nascent democratic communities—not in the sense of giving students sovereignty over schoolwork—but in the sense of creating cooperative settings where students are encouraged to pay attention to how their behavior helps or hinders the work of the classroom and how the atmosphere of the classroom helps or hinders each student. On those occasions when rules were invoked, it was always with reference to how conforming to the rules advantaged the students and the common mission. Within a few weeks after the start of the school year, talk of rules and disciplinary consequences between teachers and students became surprisingly infrequent.

In contrast, those teachers who did not see the moral dimensions of their practice gave a good deal more prominence, throughout the school year, to mentioning rules, procedures, and disciplinary consequences. Their classrooms had significantly more interruptions to instructional time due to issues typically lumped under the heading “classroom management” or “school discipline.” Among the conclusions we drew from our inquiries is that a surprising number of teachers do not have a good sense of how the moral dimensions of their work might influence their pedagogy. Hence they do not see the classroom as fertile ground for advancing their own moral development, or for cultivating traits of character and dispositions that prepare students, not just for democratic governance, but for democratic ways of living. What more powerful rationale do we need for pursuing the virtue narrative? This narrative sustains a pedagogy that promises to enhance opportunities to learn and provides students with understandings and dispositions central to democratic governance and ways of living.

Are you now, as nominee for Secretary of Education, willing to consider the virtue narrative as a worthy contender for inclusion in your statement to the Senate committee? Perhaps even prepared to offer it as an alternative to the narrative of success? Still in doubt? Maybe one more slice of argument will turn the tide.

There is a growing belief among political theorists and commentators that American democracy is in trouble. In defense of that position, I could simply refer you to the current shenanigans of the U.S. Congress. Or the precipitous decline in investigative reporting among news media. Or the growing gap between the rich and the poor, occurring alongside the enormous influence that wealth exerts on political decision-making. Or the growing number of books and high-brow magazine articles that despair over the state of democracy in America. A

few days ago I Googled the query: “Is American democracy in trouble?” I was astounded that the search produced 3,710,000 hits. If you do the same and then just skim the entries on the first few pages it’s likely to add significantly to your own sense of despair. Among them is a recent entry by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, who writes,

We Americans also have to work to make our country a compelling example of capitalism and democracy, not just the world’s cleanest dirty shirt when it comes to our economy and not just the best democracy money can buy when it comes to our politics.

The most important thing we could do to improve the prospects of democracy in the world “is to fix our democracy at home,” said Larry Diamond, a democracy specialist at Stanford University. “The narrative of American decline and democratic dysfunction damages the luster of democracy in the world and the decisions of people to see it is a model worth emulating. That is in our power to change. If we don’t reform and repair democracy in the United States, it is going to be in trouble globally.” (2015, 1, 11)

So are you now ready to embrace the virtue narrative? If you hired me to advise you on your responses to the Senate, I would tell you *not* to choose it over the success narrative. I hope you greeted that last sentence with a mental, “Huh?” Here I am trying to build the strongest argument I can for the virtue narrative, then I turn around and assert that it should not be part of the national educational platform. What’s going on? Though the virtue narrative remains a fundamental element of schooling and democracy, implementing it as part of a national policy agenda is the wrong approach.

To understand why, consider the difference between macro level policy and micro level practice. Macro levels include national and state entities. Micro levels are local, including schools and classrooms. The expression “Think globally, act locally,” offers a good encapsulation of this macro-micro difference. There are huge challenges in translating macro level policies into micro level practices. If you have been in the field of education for any length of time, I’m fairly certain you have a good idea of what I’m getting at here.

Many otherwise bright and thoughtful policy makers and analysts often fail to see what happens to the goals and intentions contained in macro-level policies as these filter down from national and state levels to district, school and classroom levels. The policy makers appear to assume that macro level policies will drive micro level practices in ways that fully realize the intentions of the policies, as if the process were analogous to a logical syllogism—wherein the premises that stipulate the goals logically entail the specific practices that achieve that goal. What gets lost here is the profound complexity of the systems in place, the problems encountered in turning a policy formulated in one context into a practice that takes place in a very different context, along with the high probability that unintended consequences will upend the original goal.

If the virtue narrative were promulgated as law or policy at the macro level, what might happen to it as it works its way down through the many layers of the system? If past experience is a guide, the risk of screwing it up is enormously high. There is more involved here than simply messing up the translation of policy into practice. We want to keep the virtue narrative off the national policy agenda because any attempt to mandate or regulate virtue through government is simply wrongheaded.

Remember the sources of virtue? Home, church, school. These are settings that are intimate, dependent on valued personal relationships, where trust and respect are key, and where moral ideals and prescriptions are infused as a part of human growth and development. Recall, too, the special role of the school in this endeavor. Like church and home, it is a place of personal relationships, but it is different in the special obligation it carries to foster virtues critical to democracy.

If I have this right, it could well be that the success narrative is an appropriate policy agenda for the macro level so long as it does not diminish or destroy the forming of relationships and the pursuit of practices that are vital to the virtue narrative. If the success narrative is manifest as high stakes testing, as the sole determinant for judging teachers and their schools, as the predominant basis for how administrators and teachers relate to one another, and as the main signal to parents and students that success is the only reason they are in school, then the success narrative demeans the virtue narrative and makes it far more difficult to follow.

The challenge we face is to pursue the success narrative in ways that complement the virtue narrative. Properly conceived and balanced, the two will mutually reinforce one another. To achieve this symbiotic link, policy makers and educators at all levels must act in ways that give prominence to the virtue narrative, while acknowledging that law and regulation are too blunt as instruments for the promotion of virtue. As such it is up to you and me, educators at the micro level, to articulate with more care and depth the moral work of teaching. It is up to us to see the moral dimensions of our practice and to share our insights just as we share teaching tips, lesson plans, and curriculum guides. Our task is to make the moral work of teaching far more visible and worthy than it has been. The proper education of the young and the preservation of democracy depend on our doing so.

Sometimes, in small flights of fancy, I think of virtue as music. Music plays in our heads and to our ears as we go about doing other things: driving, reading, thinking, and working. Virtue is something like music; it accompanies much that we do, very often determining how we do it. Whenever this fanciful simile pops into my head, it almost always sparks the remembering of a quotation from Lewis Thomas. In a wonderful little book with the alluring title of *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*, Thomas writes:

I maintain, despite the moment's evidence against the claim, that we are born and grow up with a fondness for each other, and we have genes for that. We can be talked out of it, for the genetic message is like a distant music and some of us are hard of hearing. Societies are noisy affairs, downing out the sound of ourselves and our connection. Hard-of-hearing we go to war. Stone-deaf we make thermonuclear missiles. Nevertheless, the music is there, waiting for more listeners. (1983, p. 105)

Can you hear the music of the virtue narrative?

It's there, waiting for us to listen.

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