

**Whither Thou Goest:  
Education, Democracy, and the  
Building of a *Common* Future**

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## Preface

This essay is addressed to education sector policy-makers, planners, curriculum specialists and professionals from other sectors charged with the task of strengthening civil society. It offers a conceptual model and framework that can be used to assess the degree to which a country's formal education system furthers the establishment of democratic values and behaviors. The aim of such an assessment is, of course, to ensure that formal education systems nurture—to the maximum extent feasible—vibrant democracies.

What is the constellation of attitudes, values, beliefs and knowledge that citizens need in order to sustain democracy? What obstacles do education systems and schools face as they endeavor to imbue diverse populations of learners with the knowledge and mindset needed to make democracies work? What more can education systems and schools do to promote democracy? These are the questions that this essay seeks to answer.

Once readers have engaged in a thoughtful consideration of these matters, they should be able to develop broad-based plans for assessing the degree to which a nation's schools help citizens maintain a highly functional democracy. Specifically, readers should feel equipped to engage a broad range of education sector stakeholders in determining whether:

1. Students acquire and apply beliefs, values, skills, knowledge, and attitudes that foster or sustain democracy
2. A school system's key policies and practices (including those bearing on finance, access, equity, and curriculum) are consistent with democratic values
3. Community members improve the quality of education by working together in ways that are consistent with democratic values, skills, and behaviors

On the basis of the ensuing dialogue, essay readers should also be able to engage stakeholders in formulating action steps to strengthen ties between a nation's schools and its democratic institutions. Illustrative actions steps that readers will surely consider include the following:

- Aligning the hidden and official curricula through administrative reforms, teacher training, consciousness-raising, and effective supervision
- Sponsoring and supporting outreach activities that bolster household demand and support for schooling
- Creating and strengthening community-based mechanisms for exerting influence on education-related decisions
- Enforcing or promulgating laws, regulations, and constitutional principles that bring about educational excellence and equity
- Formulating democratic criteria to guide the financing and administration of schools

Preparation of this essay was funded by USAID's Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project, which promotes the discussion of "theoretical and applied aspects of the development, testing, and adaptation of educational innovations within learning systems." In keeping with this vision, the present essay is intended to further one important innovation: the introduction of whole systems thinking to the question of how a society should organize learning systems in order to achieve democratic ideals.

## Whither Thou Goest: Education, Democracy, and the Search for a *Common Future*

Ultimately, democracy is about citizens who see their lives as so intertwined that they have no choice but to commit to shaping and sharing a common future.

*"Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people...."* (The Book of Ruth)

### Introduction

A researcher recently investigated internationally funded projects designed to promote democracy in a Caribbean country where decades of dictatorship, corruption and abuse had only lately been eclipsed by a new phenomenon: free and fair elections. The projects under scrutiny had been launched because local citizens, along with the global human rights community, were committed to doing something more than merely watching and waiting to learn whether a ballot box overture could be transformed into a full symphony of democracy.

In her first few days of fieldwork, the researcher managed to conduct some twenty interviews with project managers; field staff; participants; municipal government officials; and representatives of sponsoring corporations. Surprisingly, one theme—a theme not included or even contemplated in the investigator's questionnaires and research protocols—emerged over the course of each and every interview she conducted: the question of garbage!

Each respondent had a different tale to tell about rubbish removal (or the lack thereof), refuse disposal, and litterbugs. In real, tangible ways the crucible of democracy had become the garbage can. Why?

True democracy means more than a constitution, elections, and the rule of law. It is also about widespread acceptance of a social contract that entails responsible actions, good citizenship and a belief that no one is above the law (even if it's only a law about littering). Democracy entails empathy and respect for others as well as a deep-rooted conviction that individual actions often carry communal consequences. Cooperation and a willingness to consider issues from perspectives other than one's own are democracy's life forces. Democracy's sustenance comes from citizens who, recognizing their interdependence, seek to achieve an appropriate balance between their personal interests and those of the greater good. And, democracy's longevity depends on citizens who strive to create a common future that transcends differences of ethnicity, religion, race, class, gender and lifestyle.

There are several factors that describe the nitty-gritty of democracy as much as they determine how much grit will clog the streets: a citizenry's commitment to live every day mindful of the fact that individual actions ramify into societal consequences; the respect that citizens accord one another; and, the willingness of individuals from diverse backgrounds to cooperate in the building of a more rewarding common future.

The unexpected link between garbage and democracy that emerged from the researcher's interviews underscored an essential truth: democratic ideals are not abstract. Rather, they are lived and made manifest in citizens' most seemingly trivial, quotidian behaviors as well as through such lofty pursuits as voting and engaging in local governance.

Behaviors are products of a complex web of attitudes, values, beliefs and knowledge. Most well established democratic societies expect their schools to play an important role in helping citizens to develop a set of attitudes, values, beliefs and knowledge that are conducive to the maintenance of democratic institutions. However, an astonishing number of countries across the globe have only recently entered into the ranks of the world's democracies. In many cases, their schools and educational systems are not yet geared to the task of fostering democracy.

This essay addresses a question of paramount concern to those who work in or offer support to such countries: how can education best promote democracy? Specifically, what are the *attitudes, values, beliefs* and *knowledge* that citizens need in order to sustain vibrant democracies, and what is the role that education can play in their transmission?

### **Beliefs, Values, Attitudes, Knowledge, and Skills for Democracy**

Let's begin our analysis with definitions of some key terms.

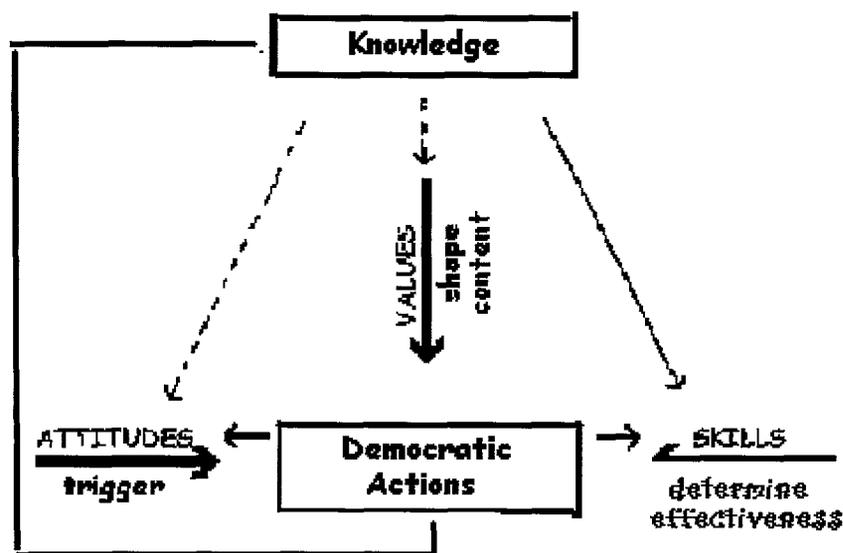
- **Beliefs:** *propositions an individual holds to be true.* Illustrative beliefs that are critical to the maintenance of democracies include the following: no one should be above the law; the law must be applied fairly to all; and that individuals can influence the course of events (i.e., the notion of personal efficacy—individuals are not powerless bystanders in the drama of their own lives).
- **Values:** *convictions and principles that serve as guideposts for an individual's ethical and moral choices.* Illustrative values that are particularly conducive to democracies include the following: citizens have both rights and responsibilities; people should be treated with respect; diversity is a societal asset; people should practice fair play (i.e., the notion of equity).
- **Attitudes:** *thoughts, feelings, and opinions that serve as guideposts for choices individuals make in matters where they perceive themselves to be stakeholders.* Examples of attitudes that are conducive to democratic institutions include the following: a willingness to compromise; a willingness to fulfill civic obligations; a

desire to consider diverse viewpoints before taking decisions; a desire to participate in the political process; a willingness to question authority; a willingness to formulate options independently; an ability to feel empathy for others and then take action based on that feeling; and, a willingness to volunteer.

- **Knowledge:** *an individual's inventory of facts, data, information, and understandings about phenomena occurring in natural or social contexts.* Democracy is promoted through specific fact-based knowledge concerning history; political systems; constitutional provisions related to rights and responsibilities; laws governing corruption and redress; legislative and judicial processes; and competence in official and local languages.
- **Skills:** *an individual's ability to take the actions needed in order to achieve a democracy-related objective.* Examples of skills that strengthen democracy include the following: the ability to gain access to information needed in order to arrive at informed views on matters of public policy; the ability to think critically; the ability to assess information quality (by evaluating the reliability of information sources, the accuracy of content, and use of propagandistic rhetoric); respectful listening to views expressed by others; turn-taking; and, an ability to achieve consensus.

These definitions suggest a high degree of interdependence among the terms presented. Specifically, *attitudes trigger democratic action*, while *values shape the content of that action* and *skills determine the action's effectiveness*. While knowledge may contribute to the development of attitudes and values, attitudes and values can also exist absent supporting knowledge. In contrast, skill sets are knowledge-dependent. These relationships are depicted in Figure One.

**Figure One. How Knowledge, Values, Attitudes and Skills Shape Democratic Actions**



## Some Key Ideas Related to These Definitions

- Knowledge alone does not lead to democratic behaviors. Indeed, while knowledge greatly informs skills, knowledge is considerably less influential when it comes to fostering attitudes and values.
- Democratic actions—immersion by individuals into the democratic process itself—shapes knowledge, attitudes, skills and values. Indeed, such experiential encounters with democracy exert more influence on attitudes and values than knowledge removed from a context of action.
- Schools are best equipped to impart knowledge and develop skills. They are less suited to the task of imbuing students with attitudes and values although this job is (and certainly should be) part of their mission.

What limitations do schools face in their ability to impart the attitudes and values most conducive to democracy? First of all, in many communities, parents and religious authorities choose to retain exclusive control over processes linked to the transmission of society's core attitudes and values. In such settings, schools do not enjoy a mandate to introduce values and attitudes in conflict with longstanding tradition.

In countries where pedagogical traditions favor rote learning, conditions also mitigate against an effective, school-based approach to the acquisition of new attitudes and values that can reverse longstanding, undemocratic practices. Rote instruction leaves little room for active learning. Yet it is active, socially mediated, experiential learning that is most likely to create the foundation for democratic values and attitudes.

Another factor that thwarts school-based efforts to nurture democratic attitudes and values is the significant gap that exists between the official, "manifest" curriculum and the so-called "hidden curriculum." Entrenched in school culture and daily life, the "hidden curriculum" is never set down in writing. Often, the hidden and manifest curricula are at odds with each other, and nowhere is this more so than in the realm of values and attitudes. For example, the manifest curriculum may include content on the importance of treating all people with respect and dignity. But, the hidden curriculum sends an entirely different message to young learners when, for example, girls are seldom if ever recognized by their teachers, when bullying and aggressive behaviors are tolerated, or when blatant favoritism is shown to children from socially advantaged backgrounds.

The most important implication that arises from this analysis is that schools are only partially equipped to do the job of imparting the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills that learners must acquire in order to ensure the perpetuation of democratic ideals and behaviors. If schools alone can't perform this vital transmission task, than how will the void be filled? What is called for is a holistic approach that examines education in the broadest possible range of contexts in which it occurs. Let's now turn to the task of creating a framework for this holistic approach.

## A Framework for Strengthening Democracy through Education

To understand how education can strengthen democracy, three factors—and the relationships among these factors—must be clearly understood. The first of these is what we will call *democratic capital*, the inventory of a country’s institutions, traditions, laws, cultural practices and behaviors that serve to sustain or foster democracy. Clearly, education can contribute to the creation of democratic capital in many ways. Schools, for example, are essential in imparting specific, fact-based knowledge of history, political systems, constitutional provisions related to rights and responsibilities, laws governing corruption and redress, as well as legislative and judicial processes.

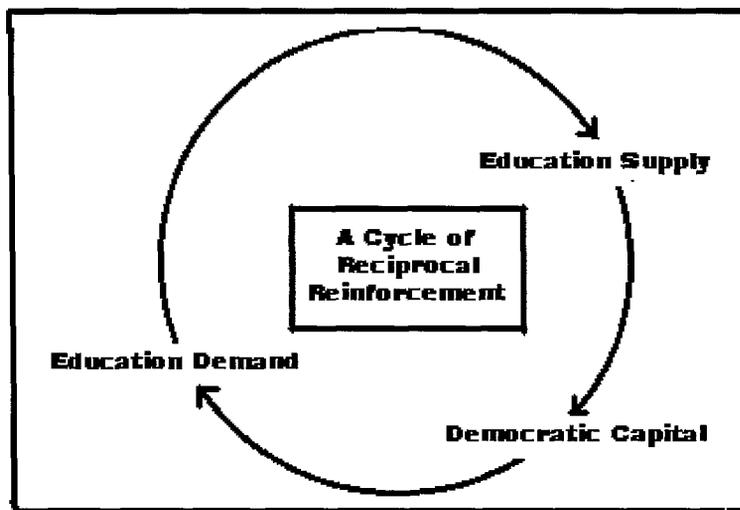
The second factor that governs the degree to which education will strengthen democracy is *demand for schooling*. Demand is a byproduct of many considerations including cultural norms, economic production systems, and household resources. To the extent that demand for schooling is low, the potency of education as a force for nurturing democracy is also limited.

A third factor that determines the influence of schooling in the development of democratic behaviors is *education supply*. *Quantitative* dimensions of education supply include the enrollment capacity of schools (i.e., the ratio of the number of students for whom school places exist to the total number of school-aged children); the size of student catchment areas; per pupil expenditures; student repetition rates; and the ratio of teachers to learners. *Qualitative* dimensions of education supply include teacher characteristics, availability of textbooks and other learning aids; the content of both the manifest and hidden curricula; the medium of instruction; the timing and duration of instruction; and the degree to which girls and students from stigmatized backgrounds (e.g., ethnic and religious minorities; the poor; and others deemed to be “outsiders”) are made to feel wanted and included.

Many studies have concluded that when the education supply is perceived to be of low quality, demand for education is also low. Parents often give voice to this relationship between supply and demand. When asked why their children are not enrolled in school, they frequently reply, “I don’t send my children because they don’t learn anything there. It’s better for them to stay at home and help out here.”

In summary, then, these three factors are reciprocally related as depicted in Figure Two. Education *quality* is both influenced by and, in turn, influences *demand* for education. Both *supply* and *demand* for education help determine a country’s *democratic capital*. *Democratic capital* creates a culture of participation that, in turn, leads to higher *demand* for schooling. Of course, this demand will be dampened if parents perceive that the quality of schooling is poor. However, if the stock of democratic capital is abundant, then these same parents will be able to take the actions needed to improve school quality—thereby introducing a change in the *education supply*.

**Figure Two. How a Nation’s Democratic Capital, Education Supply and Education Demand Influence One Another**



What outcomes should we expect in a country where the education system and supporting institutions have performed optimally to support democratic ideals, principles, values and behaviors? In such countries, *a school system's key policies and practices (including those bearing on finance, access, equity, and curriculum) would be consistent with democratic values.* The value that people should be treated with respect would be lived in schools through curricular and pedagogical choices that value what children know and do outside of school, by individualizing teaching strategies to recognize differences among learners, and by creating learning environments in which all children can succeed so that no child is stigmatized by failure.

The value that diversity is a societal asset would be lived through schools where students' ethnicity, home language, social class, and gender mirror the heterogeneity found in the community. Textbooks and lesson plans would explore these differences in positive terms without presenting or contributing to stereotypes.

The value that people should practice fair play (i.e., equity) would be lived by eliminating differences in per pupil outlays that cannot be explained by differences in pupil needs. And, there would be a widespread recognition that equity does not entail providing all students with the same set of resources (equality of inputs without equity of outcomes). Instead, attention would be given to marshaling the wherewithal needed to ensure that all learners meet the same high performance standards (equity of outcomes without equality of inputs).

Another outcome we would expect in a country where the education system and supporting institutions are doing well at democracy-building is that *students acquire and apply beliefs, values, skills, knowledge, and attitudes that foster or sustain democracy.* In such countries, for example, learners *believe*, whether because of their experiences inside or out of the classroom, that no one is above the law; that the law is applied fairly to all; and that individuals are empowered to shape their personal and communal destinies. Such students hold *attitudes* that favor the practice of compromise; fulfillment of civic obligations; consideration of multiple perspectives before taking decisions; participation in political processes; and the questioning of authority. These are settings where learners have good *knowledge* of their history, political system, and constitution. They know the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and comprehend legislative and judicial processes. And, in these countries learners are proficient in a number of

important *skill areas*. They have the ability to gain access to information needed in order to arrive at informed views on matters of public policy. They assess information and think critically while routinely demonstrating an ability to listen respectfully to the views of others. These are students who are gifted in achieving consensus.

A third outcome we would perceive in countries where the education system and supporting institutions strengthen democracy is that *community members shape the education enterprise in ways that reflect and strengthen democratic values, skills, and behaviors*. Parents from diverse backgrounds would be involved in school governance and would contribute to decision-making around such critical issues as resource generation and allocation. They would have both the mandate and the skills to monitor school performance against explicit quality standards. Furthermore, they would have the means to hold school authorities accountable when expectations are not met.

When does education enhance the capacity of a society to live democratically? When three conditions are met:

- Students acquire and apply beliefs, values, skills, knowledge, and attitudes that foster or sustain democracy
- A school system's key policies and practices (including those bearing on finance, access, equity, and curriculum) are consistent with democratic values
- Community members apply democratic values, skills, and behaviors to the task of strengthening the education enterprise

These three conditions characterize an environment with enormous potential for harnessing the energy of education to support democracy. However, if this potential is to be realized, education sector actors must be able to perform the following tasks competently:

- Where democracy is thwarted by the hidden curriculum, align the hidden and manifest curricula through administrative reforms, teacher training, consciousness-raising, and effective supervision
- Sponsor and support outreach activities that bolster household demand and support for schooling (including parental decisions about which children to send to school; when to enroll children; and household investments that enhance children's learning capacity)
- Create and strengthen community-based mechanisms for exerting influence on education-related decisions
- Enforce or promulgate laws, regulations, and constitutional principles that bring about educational excellence and equity
- Apply democratic criteria to the financing and administration of schools (including decisions about quality, per pupil expenditure, coverage, teacher deployment, school plant siting, credentialing, and in-service training)

## **Putting A Framework for Strengthening Democracy through Education to Work**

What is the utility of a framework for examining how the education sector is strengthening a country's civil society? How can such a framework be used to further enhance education's contribution to democracy?

The principal value of the framework lies in its suitability for such tasks as the following:

- Evaluating the extent to which education's potential as a vehicle for strengthening democracy has been realized in a given country
- Applying a "whole systems approach" to the redesign of educational initiatives
- Planning and launching strategic partnerships to fortify civil society
- Helping teachers and administrators to think creatively about how to enhance the relationship between classroom instruction and democratic behavior
- Examining education system governance practices in light of both education system performance and broader societal goals
- Building consensus among education sector professionals concerning the importance of broad-based community participation in education
- Systematizing the collection of best practice cases to improve the state of the art for strengthening democratic institutions through education sector activities

To illustrate the framework's versatility, let's use it to generate some thumbnail sketches of best practice drawn from diverse countries around the world.

Examples of best practice school-based teaching and learning activities that lead students to acquire beliefs, values, skills, knowledge, and attitudes that nurture democracy include:

- Development of critical thinking skills in all areas of the curriculum so that students can analyze and evaluate ideas and situations from a variety of perspectives in order to come to a well reasoned and substantive position
- School-based experiences with voting, holding elective office and advocating positions
- Use of active learning pedagogical approaches that involve open-ended questioning, cooperative learning, and problem-solving
- Opportunities for students to engage in civic action projects

These practices have been observed in a wide variety of country contexts including the Escuela Nueva of Colombia, the community school movements of Egypt and Malawi, and in the Nueva Escuela Unitaria schools of Guatemala.

Best practice examples of how a school system's policies and practices are contributing to democratization include:

- Efforts to decentralize education by placing more resources in the hands of local people and creating new avenues of accountability for performance

- Efforts to make education sector decision-making more transparent to stakeholders result in greater stakeholder participation
- Creation of community-based schools to meet the special needs of underserved populations

Many countries are now decentralizing their education systems. Benin, Mali, Malawi, Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa are among the African nations engaged in this course of action. Elsewhere, Peru, Indonesia, Israel, Bosnia and the Czech Republic have recently embraced decentralization. Often, as in the cases of Senegal and Ghana, decentralization is linked to broad-based education reform that also addresses questions of equity, quality, and coverage.

In Uganda, the Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project helped community members, as well as teachers and students use participatory action research to assess and analyze local education needs and then develop action plans that address these needs. In Ghana, the Community-School Alliances (CSA) Project is working across the country to strengthen the role that communities play in education. CSA's programmatic strategy includes participatory research (to raise awareness of how community members can contribute to schooling), training for PTAs and School Management Committees, micro-grants to help communities implement school-based activities, and an awareness-raising media campaign. The project also has developed an innovative monitoring and evaluation system that is tracking the impact of community participation efforts on educational quality in 110 districts.

Examples of best practice community participation strategies that lead to changes in household behaviors known to influence education outcomes include:

- Recruitment of parents and other community members to serve as tutors or home educators who reinforce what children have learned in school
- Parental encouragement of educationally appropriate behavior (e.g. regular attendance, personal hygiene, and good nutrition)
- Enlisting parents to contribute their personal (household) resources to enhance the educational enterprise (e.g. school construction or maintenance, purchase of textbooks and school uniforms)

These practices can be observed in diverse settings including the Colombian Escuela Nueva Program, the Fe Y Alegria Program, which operates in 12 Latin American countries and involves communities in the construction and maintenance of schools; and in the West African TIPE Program (Training--Information Program on Environment) engages students and households in environmentally focused social action projects.

The framework is also useful in identifying gaps—opportunities for action in areas where little has been done to date. Here are some examples:

- There are few documented cases of student involvement in activities to enforce regulations that affect education or of student participation in the administration of schools other than through the mechanism of school government

- Cases of student involvement in outreach and mobilization activities that influence behaviors and values at the household level are not well known. One notable exception to this generalization is the highly acclaimed Child to Child Program.
- There are few instances of systematic, routine monitoring practices that focus on the hidden curriculum when determining the extent to which school-based teaching and learning practices mirror a school system's equity and access policies

## **Conclusions**

We began our consideration of the linkages between education and democracy with a tale of garbage disposal in the Caribbean to illustrate a key point: democratic ideals are not abstract. Rather, they are lived and made manifest in the ordinary, everyday behaviors of citizens. Routinely tossing one's rubbish into public spaces suggests that some important preconditions for achieving a thriving democracy have not yet been met. Democracy does not flourish unless citizens are vitally aware that their individual actions ramify into societal consequences. Democracy will not blossom if citizens fail to accord one another respect. The seeds of democracy will never take root unless citizens routinely balance personal interests against the common good.

In short, democracy depends upon a citizenry imbued with a constellation of beliefs, values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are conducive to its maintenance. Knowledge alone does not lead to democratic behaviors. Indeed, while knowledge greatly informs skills, it is considerably less influential when it comes to fostering attitudes and values.

This is why strategies that rely exclusively on civics education approaches to strengthen democracies are doomed to failure. Democratic values and skills must also be mirrored in how classrooms are organized, in the essence of teacher-student and student-student relationships, and in an alignment of the hidden and manifest curricula around issues vital to democratization. Experiential encounters with democracy will always exert more influence on attitudes and values than knowledge transmitted outside a context of action.

Schools are well suited to impart knowledge and develop skills. Unfortunately, they are less well equipped to imbue students with attitudes and values. For schools to develop more effectiveness in this arena it will be necessary for them to form closer partnerships with parents, to introduce more effective systems of support for active learning, and to develop techniques to minimize those conflicts between the manifest and hidden curricula that have a bearing on democratic values and attitudes. What is called for is a holistic approach that examines the education enterprise in the broadest possible range of contexts where it occurs: in schools, in ministries of education, in the household, in teacher training institutes, in supervisory meetings, and in community-based groups concerned with education.

Some next steps to pave the way for such a holistic approach to education and its role in promoting democracy might include the following:

- A set of country assessments that focus on needs in relation to the specific knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required to maintain or strengthen democratic institutions. Such studies would then examine how schools and related institutions could build on strengths to address the shortfalls identified
- Development of a toolkit to assess the degree to which the manifest and hidden curricula achieve congruence in transmitting values and attitudes essential for democracy
- Systematic, country-specific research by collaborating political scientists and educators on the values, attitudes, knowledge, and skill sets that matter most at different stages of democratic development (e.g., emerging democracies; fragile democracies; well established democracies)

True democracy goes beyond a constitution, elections, and the rule of law. It is also about widespread acceptance of a social contract that entails responsible actions, good citizenship and a belief that no one is above the law. It rests on empathy, respect for others and the willingness of citizens who cooperate with one another to consider issues from perspectives other than their own. But, above all, democracy depends on individuals who, recognizing their interdependence with others, seek to achieve an appropriate balance between their personal interests and those of the greater good. Schools can contribute to democratic transformation, but far more will be accomplished when countries adopt a holistic approach that takes into consideration the widest possible variety of actors and settings involved in the education enterprise. When that happens, it will be routine for citizens to live the words that Ruth spoke more than two millennia ago: "...whither thou goest, I will go; ... thy people shall be my people...."