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# CONTENTS

Foreword: An Unfolding Conversation.....	ix
<b>1 Our Perspective .....</b>	<b>1</b>
The Questions of Public Education: Why, Who, and What For? .....	2
<i>Michelle Pidgeon</i>	
Making School More Meaningful: Perspectives on the Purposes of Schooling From an Alaska Native Context.....	13
<i>Eve Tuck and Beverly Tuck</i>	
<b>2 Our Perspective .....</b>	<b>21</b>
The Purpose of Public Schooling in the 21st Century .....	22
<i>Bryan Brassington</i>	
I Earned This.....	29
<i>Sami Miranda</i>	
What I Learned, What I Teach.....	35
<i>Phillip Tacata</i>	
<b>3 Our Perspective .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Student Voices: Thoughts on Public Education.....	46
<i>Compiled by Bill Hood and Kristina Manfron</i>	
Seeing the Purposes of School in the 21st Century: Diverse Youths' Perspectives on Schools' Objectives, Supports, and Impediments .....	55
<i>Kristien Zenkov</i>	

# **Making School More Meaningful: Perspectives on the Purposes of Schooling From an Alaska Native Context**

**Eve Tuck and Beverly Tuck**

From our vantage points, it is difficult to defend the historical trajectory of public schooling in the United States, yet we find ourselves unwilling to walk away from what we see as present and future possibilities of public schooling, for our families, for other Indigenous people, and for all students and families. We write this essay as two Unangan (Aleut) women, mother and daughter, both educators, both writers and readers. Eve, Beverly's eldest daughter, is an assistant professor of educational foundations, preparing educators to teach in public schools, and writing about education policy, educational injustice, Indigenous theories, and social science research. Beverly has worked as a public school teacher for more than 35 years and now collaborates closely with elementary school teachers as a mentor in literacy pedagogy and curriculum.

Although we have varied experiences and perspectives, we write this essay as a "we," dipping, at times, into first-person singular when necessary. We write as a "we" in order to convey shared analyses of schooling and combined visions for the purposes of schooling. We begin with a discussion of our educational contexts, again emphasizing what is shared across our two generations. We then turn to a description of how Beverly determined the purposes of schooling in her own classrooms, and a summary of Eve's empirical research with urban youth on the purposes of schooling as distinct from the purposes of education. Drawing from those experiences, we then present a discussion of what the purposes of taxpayer-supported public schools in the 21st century are and should be. As a whole, in this essay, we are curious about how schooling can be more meaningful and how to make what is possible more probable.

For both of us, our Aleut elders have shaped not only our understandings of knowledge and knowing but also our responsibility to prior generations and the generations to come. When we ask ourselves the question, How did I learn what I have learned? one of the most resounding answers is from Masura, Beverly's mother and Eve's grandmother. Masura taught each of us to know the world through knowing people, through making the most of our encounters with our surroundings, to delight in making sense of the world in our own ways, and to understand the deep relationship between

survival and beauty. Masura grew up on St. Paul Island, one of the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea, part of the Aleutian chain far from the coast of Alaska. Alaska Native peoples have lived in Alaska for more than 10,000 years. Most communities disbelieve the land bridge story that has been applied to them and have their own origin stories of how they came to be in a particular place. The Aleutian Islands and Alaskan Peninsula were partially colonized by Russia in the mid-1700s.

St. Paul Island is our favorite place on earth, with rolling hills; dramatic cliffs; wind-swept surfaces of sand, lava, and rock; tall grasses; flowers; berries; seals; and always, always the sea. Some say that Russian fur seal hunters originally brought Aleuts to the Pribilofs in the first years of Russian colonization as slaves of the fur seal harvest. Our elders say that although our first colonizers may have thought they were enslaving our ancestors, our true purpose on the Pribilofs was not as slaves but as protectors of the seals, whose well-being continues to be tied to our own well-being in the present time. When Masura was a child and young woman, Aleuts on St. Paul Island were under the authority of White Village Supervisors employed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of the Interior. Between the 1867 purchase of Alaska and statehood in 1959, Alaska Native peoples were technically citizens of the United States but were still treated as wards of the state, meaning there was no legal self-determination. One of the ways the Village Supervisors "managed" Aleut families was to conduct unannounced cleanliness inspections of private homes. Other management strategies included curfews and limitations on Aleut access to currency. All of these surveillance activities were motivated by profit; a trade agreement between the United States, Russia, Canada, and Japan determined that only Aleut people could harvest the fur seal. Thus, under U.S. occupation, many more generations were indentured forced laborers to a colonial government.

Broken promises and betrayal have defined the relationship between Aleut people and the U.S. nation-state and therefore are a defining feature of our personal-tribal educational contexts. In just one example, after Dutch Harbor was bombed in 1942 during World War II, every person of Aleut ancestry was removed from the entire Aleutian chain and the Pribilofs and interned in abandoned warehouses and canneries on the southeast coast of Alaska. Over 4 years, many, many in our community died of starvation, disease, accidents due to the uninhabitable conditions of the government-appointed shelters, and freezing to death. The eldest and youngest generations were the most affected. Many deaths and illnesses were preventable, had the U.S. federal government provided adequate food, medical care, and shelter, and not needlessly extended the length of internment.

Another core component of our personal-tribal educational contexts is the legacy of Indian boarding schools and village schools, schools in Alaska Native villages created by the U.S. Federal Government. Before the village

school on St. Paul Island extended to 12th grade in the early 1990s, youth needed to relocate to mainland Alaska to attend boarding schools in order to obtain a high school diploma. Boarding schools and village schools were often sites of violence and cultural genocide throughout Alaska and much of the United States in the late 1800s through the 20th century, yet the legacy of such schooling practices is not borne by Indigenous peoples alone, but all of those engaged in public schooling.

Historically, boarding schools and public schools have been means for extracting conduct and attitudes sought after by select groups of people. The purpose of boarding schools was to separate Indigenous youth from their families in order to prevent the transfer of language, culture, values, and worldviews from one generation to the next. The primary purpose of village schools was to "civilize" Indigenous students and to teach them English. Forcing Alaskan Native students to learn English even though they were separated geographically from English-speaking people (other than the Village Supervisors and teacher) embodies the concept of schooling as a project of settler colonialism. In a story from her childhood, an elder told us that she had given cause for the teacher to chase her around the classroom. When finally caught, she was placed over the teacher's lap to get a paddling. Before the teacher could swat her, she bit the teacher's ankle and ran out the door to the safety of her home. Even very young children can recognize the discrepancies between what they have been taught before entering school and what is imposed in school.

Our time spent as students in public schools outside Alaska (as the daughter of a member of the U.S. Air Force, Beverly attended K-12 schools all over the world, and Eve attended K-12 schools in Pennsylvania) was typified by a deep clash between what we knew to be true and what our schools purported was true. For example, textbooks in Eve's elementary school described Native American people as largely extinct, which slapped against the reality of her life, which was filled with very alive Indigenous people. Eve struggled with many other concepts taught in public schools, not because they were based on contradictory facts, but because as an Aleut child, the framing of knowledge in school was a mismatch with the framing of knowledge she learned in her family. Thus, what many do not understand is that when we identify as Unangan, we are not referring (only) to a social identity, but to a *very different way of being in the world*.

Observing the deep disconnect between our schooling and our education (what we learned in our lives outside of school from elders and other mentors, and from our relationships to place), our work as educators has focused on integrating into schooling what we know education *can be*. When Beverly first started teaching in 1975, her classroom was one third of the top floor of a barracks separated by plywood dividers. Arranged by invis-

ible hands, 40 one-piece desks faced the same direction in tidy rows. Paper and pencils sat as a silent welcome.

I remember the excitement I felt realizing the possibilities. The rows filled with non-English speaking Vietnamese and Cambodian children who lived in the Indo-Asian refugee camp until communities and organizations stepped forward and sponsored their families. I was trusted to teach the children to what they could expect in American classrooms, communities, and this country. I have come to understand that my true task was to help each child be able to navigate, make her or his place in what Lisa Delpit has called the "culture of power."

Creating opportunities that supported student competencies once they left the safety of our school felt very real and urgent. Throughout our time together, our classroom took on a new life. Student work, teacher-made posters, and artifacts served as reference tools and added warmth to our space. Making something from virtually nothing ignited thinking and a need to converse, a need for community within the classroom. I used what I learned in the training offered to teachers at our school and what I knew about grade-level content expectations to design and implement initial lessons. I remember searching for information about "how to" (best practices) and "what is" to make teaching decisions. Once I knew the students, I incorporated my new understandings in lesson development as well. My days were filled with analysis, interaction, and reflection.

So many years later, my days in teaching continue to be filled with interaction, analysis, and reflection, and with the desire to provide what I can to each child so she or he is better equipped to navigate, make her or his place in the world. Providing opportunities that equip a child to make meaning of the world includes being able to sustain learning once outside of the school walls. This means while inside the walls, teachers must foster in their students a desire to learn how to learn. Translated, this means a love for reading and writing must be established or nurtured from the moment a child enters a school until the moment the child leaves. In addition, what is essential to be learned or reinforced within the walls of a school is the ability to recognize the value of community—how to receive what is offered and the benefits of giving.

What Beverly strives to achieve in her teaching is not always what children experience in school. A kindergarten boy once told Beverly that he didn't like school because it took up too much of his time. He was a boy who had a lot going on in his life according to his own inventory, a boy who knew when what he was being offered in school did not live up to what he required from it. This boy, as is true for so many, already had in place a system of learning about the world. He learned many ways of making meaning from siblings, grandparents, parents, and the community. What was absent from school for him was the introduction or enhancement of new ways of learning, of exploring, of knowing.

Seeing learning as a way of knowing about the world and oneself in the world is a core component missing from schooling. Schooling is often a convoluted operation with little or no personal meaning for many youth and their families. The dynamics and social contexts of schooling in the United States work to deny most Indigenous, urban, and/or poor youth and youth of color access to meaningful schooling, and have done so historically and systematically. In this sense, schools work to reproduce existing hierarchies of race and class.

At the same time, even before the economic crisis of 2008, it was evident that the United States has not figured out how to cultivate an economy that would benefit from the meaningful education of its citizens. In other words, we do not yet have an economy that requires large numbers of people to be highly educated. The long-standing (perceived) alignment between the American economy and the purposes of American schools is unraveling at the seams. Simultaneously, expensive foreign wars and healthcare burdens have strained federal and state governments. The political pressure on elected officials to make schools answerable for the investment of tax dollars into public schools via accountability policies such as high-stakes testing has become more pronounced under these circumstances. A growing national budget and deficit put the project of public schooling under the microscope. The narrative of school reform to produce highly skilled workers has faltered, but the blame of failure is placed on schools, not on the myths of the narrative itself or the labor policies that have shaped the American economy that relies primarily upon low-wage work.

In Eve's empirical participatory action research with urban youth who have been pushed out of their public secondary schools under the auspices of the General Educational Development (GED) credential, she found that, although the purposes of schooling have always been contested, the current climate created by federal, state, and local policies has shifted the purposes of schooling to assessment. Youth reported that assessment has displaced prior purposes of schooling, rendering schooling deeply disatisfying. Further, she found that pushed-out youth reject assessment-based purposes of schooling while embracing the importance of education. Youth research participants in Eve's study made a clear distinction between their schooling and their education: in their eyes, *schooling* is defined by its unwillingness to provide the full picture of a concept and by being out of step with young people's lives. *Education* is defined by these youth as the world that they want to know and understand because they are already a part of it, and envisioning futures for themselves in it. Youth expressed their frustration and disappointment in their schooling, yet even though they are dissatisfied in their schooling, they see it as crucial to their current and future lives.

Schooling as assessment is not a compelling enough purpose to make it meaningful or resonant in youth lives (or in the lives of teachers), but we

believe it is not too late to reclaim the purposes of schooling. The project of repurposing schools does not have to entail finding the perfected purpose, only the next, better, and more meaningful purpose(s). For the youth in Eve's study, a satisfied life is a whole life: a life with friends, family, children, health, wealth, community, literature, music, and travel. A backwards planning approach would begin there; repurposed schools would hold satisfied living as their goal, with the definition of satisfaction always under revision. In the end, to fully achieve this, we'll have to reconcile the need to earn money with global capitalism and an economy that does not yet have enough meaningful work for all people. We'll also need to reconcile the goal of democracy with acts of violence committed on behalf of democracy.

To ask, "What should be the purposes of public schooling?" is different than asking "What is worth knowing?" Our views of the potential purposes of public schooling come from within an Indigenous context, in which there is often also a vibrant out-of-school education that is engaged by youth, adults, and elders. This understanding of schooling as an institution that is provided at a larger scale, across contexts, to many, and education as something that one cultivates over a lifetime, is aligned with the distinctions made between schooling and education by the urban youth in Eve's study. Thus, we envision that the purposes of public schooling *should be* as follows:

- To cultivate a life-long love of learning
- To propagate critical literacy practices
- To develop and sustain meaningful and responsible relationships to place
- To learn strategies of problem solving involving multiple variables

It should be noted that our purposes are more concerned with stances or relationships to knowing rather than content or curriculum. Critical literacy practices—those practices that emphasize actively analyzing texts (and the world) to uncover the historical, social, and political contexts at work—can be fostered within any content area. Similarly, strategies of problem solving involving multiple variables can be acquired in curricular domains as seemingly disparate as philosophy or calculus. Each of our envisioned purposes can be pursued with special attention to enriching attitudes of compassion, generosity, humility, curiosity, and justice in students.

In the context of our envisioned purposes of public schooling, we believe it is irresponsible to rely on business models in the reform of schools, especially in the face of profit-driven practices that have resulted in the abject dispossession of the citizenry at the same time that profits have continued to grow. The real practices of the market—hunting trends, short-term visions, betting against the success of everyday people, opaque products and services, large fees to fill the gaps of poor choices—are far different from

the business models being peddled to school leaders and communities. Yet what communities are likely to actually get are unsustainable, cynical, unworkable solutions disguised as industry innovations.

Before we enter school, we have learned about our world. When we step outside the school door, our learning continues. For various reasons, including high-stakes testing and other neoliberal education policies, once the step is taken inside the school, attention shifts from what the child does to what is done to the child. In many schools, a rift exists between time utilized to create opportunities within which students can develop competencies and experience satisfactions and that same time used to "deliver" instruction. Creating opportunities for student experiences requires active analysis, interaction, and reflection. Delivering instruction implies, and often manifests as, reading from text books. Education has often been reduced to delivery of instruction in schools.

Our work as educators has been to foster what we know as education—learning-to-learn skills, satisfying a need to know, seeking meaningful experience, reading and writing, participating in community—in a school setting. Clearly, schools require and are worthy of a model that reflects the complexity of the expectations placed on schools. The imposition of a business model on schools may be an attempt to bring some sort of order out of work that is messy. Teaching is not linear and may feel messy, but often it is in that untidiness, and sometimes emptiness—a bare classroom—that sparks a teacher's imagination of what can be.

In spite of our disappointment in schools, we are not willing to give up on the project of public schooling. Learning is diminished when children, teachers, parents, administrators, and community succumb to the myth that one number represents the work accomplished for a year, a school career. Yet that is where we find ourselves. The weight of test scores is oppressive. In some schools, the hope is to "close the achievement gap." School leaders and teachers get seduced into the dance of numbers with this phrase. Instead of being motivated by the teaching possibilities of our time with students, we become mesmerized by the possibility of closing the achievement gap. And before we know it, we partner with the programs, publishers, and promoters of materials and teaching practices guaranteed to close that gap instead of doing what we know to be best. Attention to the uniqueness of each student rather than a test score is possible—and necessary—in our efforts to find useful purposes in evaluation and assessment. Teachers have always developed descriptive systems to capture these measures, including reading and writing benchmark records, individual and collaborative projects, and conferencing notes. A stepping-stone toward unifying schooling and education is to acknowledge the descriptive systems teachers have in place as valid means of measuring achievement.

While the history and present iteration of public schooling are troubling, our view is that schooling is a human activity, and as such, can be characterized by a profound, albeit weathered, sort of hope. This hope is informed, complex, generative, sometimes afraid, sometimes contradictory, but always learning. This vision of hope, if embraced in schools, into teaching and teacher education, into educational policy, can yield schooling that dares to delight in the future.

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**Beverly Tuck** has been a public school teacher for more than 35 years. Her first teaching position was at the Fort Indiantown Gap Indo-Asian Refugee School in 1975. She taught at Cornwall Elementary School (Cornwall, Pennsylvania) from 1983 to 2000 and has taught at the Uptown Complex School (Atlantic City, New Jersey) since 2000. Beverly holds a master's degree from Penn State University. She became a grandmother in 2011. Beverly is an enrolled member of the Tribal Government of St. Paul Island in Alaska.