

Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education.

Michael Apple and James A. Beane (Eds.).

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The role of schools in democratic development is a contested area of idea and analysis between those who see learning contexts as processes of societal reproduction where the dominant structures and functions of society more or less stay the same. Not similar to those and even theoretically and pragmatically opposing them are what I would call, for my own purpose here, progressive and by extension pragmatic educators and thinkers who cannot lose sight of education as a transformative platform of life where students learn to empower themselves, capacitate their individual, and where necessary group agency and in the process introduce new possibilities into their lives and into the lives of their societies. Most of us would be familiar with these primary perspectives on the perceived aims of education, and some of the most important philosophers and sociologists of education have delineated so much along these lines of observations and analysis. Indeed, works by such thinkers as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Pierre Bourdieu, and others have emphasized the problems posed by undemocratic schools that incessantly short-change the needs of students for the exigencies of the market and the attached interests of the ruling elite.

In this second expanded edition of their acclaimed edited book *Democratic Schools* Michael Apple and James Beane, undoubtedly two distinguished scholars in contemporary educational research, continue some of that forward-looking tradition by critically locating along with their contributors a good number of cogent pointers and perspectives that should expand the boundaries for the noble achievement (at least on behalf of young learners) of a type of schooling that should be historically inclusive, culturally relevant, politico-economically empowering, and globally ethical. As the authors write in the preface of this new edition, such education "speaks to the deep [and growing] commitment of large numbers of people to build and defend an education that is worthy of its name rather one that is reducible simply to the efficient production of.... tests" (p. vii) with no cultural or experiential relevance for most students. Besides the short preface, the book is divided into seven chapters that are interrelated, especially in their thematic and analytical adherence to the need for a democratic education, but with diverse topical preferences that are in some cases more conceptual and in others more descriptive and of a case study nature. In chapter one, "The Case for Democratic Schools," James Beane and Michael Apple relate the stories of various groups of learners in a number of United States cities and reflect on the tasks, needs, struggles, and achievements undertaken to achieve meaningful education. Despite the heroic efforts of many teachers and school administrators, though, it is clear that democratic education "has fallen on hard times," and the need not only to relaunch, but also to redefine the meanings and the possible operationalizations of democracy in public schools is as important as ever. For Beane and Apple democracy is

clearly not only a process, but has more structure and texture, which should affirm horizontally inclusive values that represent the real lives of all.

In chapter two, "La Escuela Fratney: A Journey Toward Democracy," Bob Peterson discusses the counterstream creation of a two-way bilingual school in Milwaukee. As Peterson writes, La Escuela Fratney was "forged in a battle with recalcitrant school administration as a site of a continuing journey to create a school governed by parents and teachers" (p. 32). Here one can appreciate the need for a collaborative effort between teachers and parents, with the support of students and with this, it is hard not to see the fruits of collective actions and the power of determined activism, especially when the activists know they are on the right side of the fence. With such educational themes as *we respect ourselves and our world, we are proud to be bilingual, multicultural learners, we make a difference on planet earth, and we share stories of our world* inherent in the learning culture of the school, there is no doubt that it will aid the establishment as well as the sustainability of democratic schooling and democratic living. In chapter three, "Feelin' What They Feelin': Democracy and Curriculum in Cabrini Green," Brian Schultz describes and analyzes how his young students in Chicago successfully campaigned for better schooling infrastructure, and how despite all the odds stacked against them, achieved their objectives. Again, as stated above, the power of the many, even when they are from marginalized, impoverished neighborhoods as was the case here, can win more often than otherwise against the tyranny of the power elite whose version of educational development would conform to the maintenance of the current order of life. As Schultz recalls, the powerful words of one of the students who partly saw their struggle as a way to learn the various ways government institutions work, and how effectively they could respond to these, sums up so much about democratic schooling and the need for socioeconomic enfranchisement through this type of education.

In chapter four, "The Situation Made us Special," Barbara Brodhagen discusses how she and others were able to respond to the meaningless education that was prescribed for so many young people by establishing important spaces of democratic education through the co-creation (by students and teachers) of relevant curriculum that contained pragmatically useful questions and lessons about the contexts in which the learners lived and the world that surrounds them. Indeed, the creation of this real community of learners, which can be extended into all aspects of the learning process, would do much for the millions of kids who feel alienated in industrial-style spaces of schooling that sometimes force them to unlearn their world and to even unlink from their aspirations and needs. In chapter five, "Beyond the Shop: Reinventing Vocational Education," Larry Rosentock and Adria Steinberg challenge the less than convincing separation of academic learning from vocational training. The undemocratic implications of this claim should be clear, for generally speaking it is those from socioculturally endowed families who go into academic fields, and less privileged kids are generally streamed into non-college trade schools. Contrary to this problematic tradition, Rosentock and Steinberg discuss the case of one school that decided to challenge these assumptions, and although this is just one experiment and the rigidity of the system in this regard is still intact, it should be clear that the separation does not have to be the rule. Indeed,

there is always fundamentally more to the world of all learners than just working with their hands and their heads; a more complete life is being active with both to achieve more humanized livelihood prospects that can respond to the needs that arise in varied zones of our world at diverse temporal realities.

In chapter six, "Central Park East Secondary School: The Hard Part is Making it Happen," Deborah Meier and Paul Schwarz write about what is described as the best-known alternative school in the US, which besides being different in its philosophical orientation than other schools, still aims for the success of its students within the demands and expectations of the system. The uniqueness of this school (along with others of the same educational philosophy) was also corroborated by its guiding principles, which include such pointers as *less is more*, *personalization*, and *student as worker*. With all the promise this might have had for students, though, this experiment did not survive the demands and pull-and-push machinations of the system, which itself, as the authors correctly point out, should serve as a lesson for how best to manage such new learning experiments, which if done effectively, might enhance the democratic way of learning for many students. In chapter seven, "Lessons From Democratic Schools," Michael and James Beane give a final thought (just in the context of this book). They critically point out how the educational experiments described in this volume are not the only societal programs that are operating in the active space to establish meaningful democratic prospects and possibilities for people's educational and other well-being. Clearly there is much that is challenging the old and new ways of undemocratic education, and as the authors conclude, it is to up to each and all of us to stand up and fight for the right forms and contents of schooling.

In reading and critically interacting with this book, I was able to see so much hope in our capacity to establish radically humanized spaces of schooling that prospectively respond to the needs of millions of children whose lives are characterized by either lack of any education, which itself has undemocratic educational connotations and meanings (here I extend the analysis of this work to other areas of the world); or if there is some education, it is so irrelevant to learners' lives that it could only be described as miseducation or deschooling, and it is these entrenched realities of education that the courageous educators whose work we read in this book are challenging head on. One of the most important lessons that could come out of this work is the possibility as well as the practices of change. The system, we should know by now, is not as impenetrable as it looks: it just needs a group of kids and their conscientized teachers who are willing to comprehend the situation, examine how to deal with it, and are not willing to compromise on their fundamental rights to meaningful democratic education. As the chapters are mostly written by practitioners who also theorize on the basis of seeking pragmatic solutions, the general style of writing is direct, almost free of convoluted academic jargon, and full of learning and teaching tips that can be implemented in many classrooms without much difficulty. I expect this new expanded edition of the book to be widely read and referenced, and I would commend the editors for revisiting this fine work and reproducing it for the benefit of all learners and educators.