

Book Review

Doing Democracy: Striving for Political Literacy and Social Justice.

D.E. Lund and P.R. Carr

New York: Peter Lang, 2008

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The collection of essays and research summaries brought together by Darren Lund and Paul Carr for *Doing Democracy* is timely, current, and engaging and contributes to generations-old discourses on the role of schools and curricula as sites of and sites for deepening and broadening democratic education and engagement. This collection builds on nearly a century's worth of scholarship on democracy and education and offers avenues into a range of critical political, economic, and social literacy discourses. Notions of democracy and citizenship have evolved conceptually in theory and practice since Dewey wrote *Democracy and Education* in 1916, and scholarly literature that focuses on the development of literacies in democracy and citizenship among children has justifiably been in vogue for decades. This degree of attention from the academy reflects a body of scholarship that acknowledges that deep and broad political literacy is vital to fostering and maintaining social justice-oriented communities. Teachers and students must be well attuned and engaged in learning to live and do democracy; to do otherwise is to risk giving in to the continued erosion of democratic life and ideals.

In the foreword to *Doing Democracy*, James Banks, a highly regarded and widely published professor of diversity studies and multicultural curriculum at the University of Washington, emphasizes the benefit of using deliberative approaches to bridge spaces between and among mainstream and marginalized communities, a call reflected in virtually every chapter in this collection. Following the foreword, Lund and Carr begin their introductory chapter with an appeal to broaden the discourse on democratic learning and living beyond electoral politics, to integrate deliberative engagement and action in teaching for democracy. In this chapter they ask critical and important questions as a strategy for engaging the reader in democratic dialogue. This interrogative and provocative approach to the conversation about democracy stands in contrast to the bodies of information and constrained performances of democracy that seem to constitute a great portion of democratic curricula and pedagogy in liberal democratic nation states like Canada and the United States. Among these questions, Lund and Carr ask if "schools aim for political literacy? Do they formally and informally cultivate political literacy? Is there a place for

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political literacy within an educational milieu that has been submerged in the hazy clouds of neoliberalism?" and "[if] we are not teaching about and for political literacy, what then is the mission of the school" (pp. 11-12)?

The 19 chapters are organized thematically into four sections and are followed by an afterword. Although there is a degree of methodological, theoretical, and conceptual diversity among the chapters, most draw on a range of critical and Marxian theoretical frames. Echoing the interrogative model of the editors' chapter, contributors are asked to provide five questions at the conclusion of each chapter intended to guide reflection and encourage dialogue. Most of these questions are interesting, provocative, and engaging. However, some fall flat, calling on readers to deepen their informational knowledge, but not necessarily demanding any ethical commitment from readers to enliven democratic engagement.

The community of contributors to this collection consists of some well-established scholars and a number of newer and emerging scholars, including some whose writing on educating for democracy and citizenship is gaining traction and visibility in the field. Contributors to this collection are based in Canada, the US, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Brazil. Although these are all visibly diverse nation states, and all but the UK are sites of large Indigenous communities, only a handful of chapters take up Aboriginal themes or acknowledge political structures that operated in many of these territories before conquest or considered the relationship of these political structures to the central theme of *Doing Democracy*.

Chapters one through five make up the first section: "Framing the notion of democracy and democratic education." Here contributors speak to a range of hegemonic and commonsense discourses that bind and limit how teachers imagine the nature and practice of democracy in liberal democratic nation states. The authors advocate the cultivation and development of critical pedagogic dispositions toward curriculum and encourage teachers to imagine classrooms as spaces for social justice-oriented democratic engagement. In this section the authors explore several discourses of democratic education in liberal democracies including neoliberal policy agendas, the depoliticization of democracy and citizenship, the hegemonic erasure of difference through the deracialization of curricula, and the reinforcement of compliance with authoritarian political structures in schools. Employing varied theory channels, all five chapters offer a chorus of voices that inform and remind readers of institutional resistance to deepening and broadening teachers' and students' experiences of democracy.

In chapter one, Dave Hill writes that teachers must recognize that "they are implicated in the process of economic, cultural, and ideological reproduction, of training for capital, and of instilling individualistic, consumerist, capitalist common-sense" (p. 41). This implication, which other authors in this section extend into social, political, historical, and gender education domains, calls on teachers to acknowledge and seek to overcome a range of constraints that limit opportunities to recognize, discuss, and understand complex issues related to democratic engagement and to imagine possibilities for change. In chapter three, Jennifer Tupper notes how an uncritical acceptance of commonsense curricula can posit democratic citizenship as universalized and egalitarian,

suppressing its gendered and racial dimensions in pedagogic practice. This theme is revisited in empirical studies taken up later in this volume. There were no surprises in this section. I found all five chapters approachable and interesting. I was pleased with how key aspects of formal and hidden curricula were unpacked, particularly how teachers and students seem conditioned to accept neoliberal and authoritarian practices and other status quo arrangements while paying lip service to democratic engagement.

In the next section, "Reflections on democratic dissonance and dissidence," the reader becomes attuned to recognizing how liberal and neoliberal discourses are at work in schools and through curricula, suppressing, silencing, and ignoring marginalized, diverse, and dissenting voices. These discourses include Aboriginal experiences and understandings of democratic practice, feminist teaching strategies, and the exploration of white privilege. Chapter seven offers an interesting but unexpected avenue into democratic encounter. Here Alexandra Fidyk focuses on the interconnectedness and interdependency of living things. Drawing on the language of quantum mechanics, she notes that interdependency relies on an ambivalent state of being and acceptance of the complex and intertwined nature of personal and community narratives. This conception of democratic engagement, informed by Buddhist and Vedic traditions, requires a significant ontological shift for teachers, placing love, care, and compassion at the forefront of pedagogy, while troubling and destabilizing the liberal autonomous self. Chapter nine too, by Alirezh Asgharzadeh, is an interesting but curious inclusion in this collection. Asgharzadeh suggests a reconceptualization of secular humanism as an avenue to democratic deliberation in the Middle East, offering a new secularism that is not anti-spiritual, but that seeks to overcome entrenched religious, ethnic, social, and political particularisms and fundamentalisms. Although this chapter speaks to the themes of this section of the book and engages democratic possibilities in a region characterized by complexity, it seems a stretch to consider it an analog for reconciling complex and often more ambivalent identifications in Western liberal democracies.

The third section, "Case studies for understanding democracy in education," offers insights into spaces and places of challenges and resistances to teaching for democracy. Case study is the key element that binds somewhat disparate chapters together. Many of the case studies in *Doing Democracy* focus on preservice teachers, who as a population are negotiating the transition between student and teacher and are beginning to live with and possibly appreciate the political character of education. The studies presented in this section explore democratic literacy in the sciences, economic literacy among teachers and students, digital democracy, and the colonial education legacy that limits democratic education in Kenya. The point evident throughout this volume is that democratic literacy needs to be considered as a vital and enlivening thread that runs through the whole of written and hidden curricula. The editors are to be congratulated for including a chapter on the place of democratic social justice pedagogy in science education, because science as a category of disciplines is intertwined with neoliberalism and Western universalist understandings of knowledge. In chapter twelve, Sarah Elizabeth Barrett and Martina Nieswandt report on tensions that preservice teachers experience

in trying to balance social justice-oriented science teaching with mastery of knowledge and technical competence agendas. The first and final chapters of this section offer interesting insights into two domains of democratic education: empowerment and marginalization. Njoki Nathani Wane's chapter examines gender as a site of democratic disparity in Kenya, a country that is the product of British colonial erasure of customary community arrangements, reconstructing gender roles to a European model, and disrupting subsistence patterns to satisfy British colonial economic interests. In the final chapter in this section, Karim Remtulla considers the complex and paradoxical character of online activism and digital democracy and its power to empower and disempower, including the notion of classrooms as safe deliberative spaces. He unpacks liberal discourses that reinforce the conception of cyberspace as a space of balanced, free democratic dialogue and deliberation, noting the power of corporations and governments to shape content and accessibility.

The fourth section addresses teaching about and for democracy. Here the authors capture some of the difficulties and institutional resistances to deliberative engagement in schools and offer possibilities for how democratic education might be reimagined. In this section attention is given to avenues to overcome the discourses of compliance, cynicism, alienation, and privilege engaged in earlier chapters. In Beverly Jean Daniel and R. Patrick Solomon's chapter on preservice teachers' conceptions of democratic engagement, participants could easily articulate the middle-class trope of tolerance and safety, but fewer of them grasped how power relationships in classrooms and preconceptions of otherness constrained how they and their students would experience democracy. The research focus on preservice teachers in this chapter and in other studies reported on in this book may reflect the availability and interesting insights of this convenient research population, but this may also be a key population to whom this book is targeted. In the final chapter Shazia Shujah offers insight into the look and feel of an urban Toronto classroom driven by social justice-oriented critical pedagogy. Although this chapter suggests that teaching for political literacy and social justice is possible when teachers are committed to such a project, additional accounts of teachers reimagining and reconfiguring their own practices might have been helpful for practicing and preservice teachers who might be willing to embrace this project as their own personal and professional challenge.

The last portion of the collection, an afterword by Daniel Schugurensky, invokes the timeliness of this collection, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The project to widen and deepen democratic engagement is intrinsically connected to the educational project, recognizing the need to ensure that all human beings enjoy equal membership in the human community and that participation and engagement are not imagined as tokenistic exercises.

In general, the chapters in this collection complement each other and reinforce and reassert the importance of teaching for rich and deep democracy. I read *Doing Democracy* from my perspective as a social studies teacher and teacher educator committed to social justice-oriented pedagogy. Many of the chapters speak to important issues in teacher education and would be a good fit in undergraduate course readings. What pleases me most about *Doing*

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Democracy is that teaching for democracy is treated in its curricular and pedagogic dimensions as a notion that transcends disciplinary boundaries and hegemonic identifications; it is in teachers and students grasping the transcendent character of democratic education that avenues are opened for deep democratic and social justice-oriented engagement.