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Conceptualizing Democracy as Preparation for Teaching for Democracy

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Abstract

In this essay, a broad spectrum of the work of influential educational scholars was examined in order to identify crucial components of teaching for democracy. Synthesizing the literature with their experiences as middle level teachers and teacher educators, the authors determined those conceptions that would be most fruitful for moving pre-service teachers to enact the more “muscular” concepts that foster civic participation and social justice. This collaboration resulted in the identification of four democratic practices as a foundation for designing a course on teaching for democracy. These included amplification of the voices of historically marginalized people, recognition that those in power must work to meet the needs of those without power, recognition of the advantages of diversity even at the potential expense of efficiency, and collaboration in order to teach for democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing an expansive gap between the experience of many adolescents in schools that might truly prime them for participation in a democratic society and our own sense of how their teachers would engender such an outcome, consternation led us to consider the need for teacher candidates to have formative, even life-altering experiences in their preparatory programs that they would hold fast to and recapitulate as they began their careers in public schools. As middle grades teacher educators, we wrote this essay to assist us in conceptualizing components of a preparation program that would equip pre-service educators with the necessary knowledge and disposition to “teach against the grain,” a practice described by Cochran-Smith (1991) in her influential article illustrating the interplay of knowledge, power, and language in creating disparate educational outcomes. In order to teach for democracy, we anticipated that program graduates would be expected to bear the full effects of reform teaching from which their novice status often shielded them.

Turning to the work from long-standing researchers in the field of activist teacher education, we sought the standpoints of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Ken Zeichner as the foundation for delving into the literature on democratic teacher preparation as a means of finding clarity for what “teaching for democracy” might entail. In this essay, we will put forth the initial steps we undertook to conceptualize

democracy for ourselves in anticipation of creating curriculum to use with pre-service teachers and to explain our reasons for doing so. While our ultimate aim is to determine whether the students our graduates work with in public schools value and practice democracy as a result of what they learn from their teachers (our graduates), this could only be achieved with a close examination of the many and varied conceptions of democratic practice to embed democratic ideals in a course and program.

In order to build the practice of democracy, it has been long acknowledged that social institutions exist to prepare citizens to exercise their democratic rights and undertake their civic duties. Furthermore, as the educational arm wherein citizens learn about these social processes and become disposed to enact those responsibilities, public schools carry a great weight for realizing this critical outcome (Parker, 2002). In that a strong democracy “depends on strong democratic education” and “democratic education depends on democratic teacher education” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, p. 192), we agree that it is the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to embody democratic principles as a means for furthering democratic practices (Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2014). By extension, as middle grades teacher educators, we accept that among our foremost duties is to prepare pre-service teachers who are equipped to teach for democracy and can substantiate why they do so.

Democracy in education has been defined in numerous ways, and the practical methods that

teacher education professionals should use to enact these principles are vague. While we intend to prepare teachers who would promote their students' capacity for building an equitable society, the issue that we faced, and that is the subject of this essay, precedes curriculum design and implementation. If we anticipate that we would see public school students taught by graduates of our program actively participating in democratic practices, what might their teachers need to know and be able to do to foster such outcomes? And what might we prioritize as the teacher preparation experiences they would undergo that would build such a chain of influence? To answer these questions, we firstly had to operationalize democracy and democratic practices, which is where we began this inquiry.

Perspectives on Democracy in Education

Several conceptions of democracy in education have been put forth by education scholars. Below, we discuss several of these, including the comparison of contrasting *thick* and *thin* (Carr, 2008) and *strong* and *weak* democracy (Barber, 1989); Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) conception of citizenship education as three types, *personally responsible*, *participatory*, and *justice-oriented*; and Apple and Beane's (1995) seven criteria for democratic education.

Carr (2008) has studied democracy in teacher education extensively and contrasts the characterizations of *thick* and *thin*, which he aligns to classifications of a deeper participatory democracy rather than a more superficial representative democracy. He further argues that it is necessary for teachers to understand and exercise participatory democracy in order to ensure equitable outcomes for students. His concern is that educators who enact the shallower view prevent students from engaging in true debate and that those students will leave school ill-educated, believing their experiences in civics or patriotism are as substantive and motivating as thicker, deliberative conceptions would be. He claims that "a more global approach to understanding these broad concepts will lead to better as well as more engaged teaching and learning" (2008, p. 157). Barber (1989), too, advocates for a conception of *strong* democracy to be taught in schools whereby real participation and empowerment of all is the aim. He explains that *weak* democracy is the less burdensome type that entails activities such as voting in elections, while *strong* democracy "is a system in which every member of the

community participates in self governance" (Barber, 1989, p. 355). Carr and Barber juxtapose two ends of a spectrum to identify models and outcomes that would be valuable to use for democratic education.

In asking what concepts of good citizenship young people should learn in school, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) also explore a spectrum of beliefs about the type of democracy that could/should be taught. From their study of 10 programs throughout the United States making efforts to teach for democracy, analysis of program goals and practices enabled them to identify three conceptions of citizenship. They distinguished the conceptions of citizenship as *personally responsible*, *participatory*, and *justice-oriented* and found that the ideologically conservative conception of citizenship as personal responsibility was most often portrayed. The personally responsible citizen works, pays taxes, obeys laws, and volunteers in a crisis; the participatory citizen knows how government agencies work and knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks; and the justice-oriented citizen critically assesses social, political, and economic structures, seeks out and addresses areas of economic injustice, and knows how to effect systemic change. While these authors discussed three conceptions rather than classifying by opposite poles as detailed by Carr and Barber, we see convincing similarities among the characterizations of *thin* and *weak* democracy and *personally responsible* citizenship, and we see similarities between those conceptions of democracy considered as *thick* and *strong* and those described by Westheimer and Kahne as *participatory* and *justice-oriented* citizenship. We found that the more muscular conceptions of democratic practices were the ones these authors more commonly advocated to be modeled and advanced in schools as means for strengthening citizenry participation and influence.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) further cautioned that "decisions educators make when designing and researching these programs often influence politically important outcomes regarding the ways that students understand the strengths and weaknesses of our society and the ways that they should act as citizens in a democracy" (p. 238). From this statement, we understood the importance of taking time and energy to delve into the literature about teaching for democracy in order to ensure that we would be true to the morally-sound understanding and

for us to be aware of how easily coercion could be exercised when implementing what was to be “democratic” curriculum. Given that issues of equity are ones that a democratic society should address, we did not want our unquestioned practices to interfere with our aims.

A final work that informed us was Apple and Beane’s (1995) study of democratic schools. According to them, true democracy consists of: (a) open discussion about all popular and unpopular ideas in order to fully inform the public; (b) trust that people, both independently and collectively, can resolve problems; (c) analytical reflection and critical thinking when considering concepts, issues, and policies; (d) a sense of responsibility toward all people and a consideration of the “common good”; (e) a sense of responsibility for maintaining the rights and dignity of historically marginalized populations; (f) the knowledge that democracy is a collection of principles and standards that guide our society; and (g) organized systems that “promote and extend” democracy (pp. 6-7). While Apple and Beane’s (1995) definition is somewhat typical with regard to developing a citizenry that would engage with and expand democratic tenets, there is no commonly agreed upon definition of citizenship education or civic engagement, as these are multidimensional concepts that incorporate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors (Barrett, 2018). If we were to take up the call as our colleagues Zeichner et al. (2014), Cochran-Smith et al. (2018), and MacMath (2008) urged us to do by attending to the various dimensions of learning to engender democratic principles, we would need to investigate the literature to determine which aspects might be prioritized for emphasis in our curriculum before we would be ready to implement them with fidelity in our teacher education program.

From Literature to Lived Experience

We considered these several perspectives as we moved toward operationalizing the concept of “teaching for democracy,” by sharing what the term had come to mean to us after years of working in classrooms as teachers of young adolescents and now as teacher educators. As middle grades teachers, we were keenly aware of how essential “choice and voice” were to engaging our young students. We found that the phrase, far from being flippant shorthand, had purposefully underscored our work in middle schools and became central to our teaching

practices with adults. All too often, we witnessed times when a minor dress code violation sent a student to isolated, in-school suspension for the day, without any opportunity to explain why he had to wear the only clean shirt he had, one that sported an other-than-school-approved logo. Contrastingly, we also noted the enthusiasm for and sophisticated outcomes from learning activities that were designed around adolescents’ questions and concerns.

Thus, we noted that our experiences informed what had become a core principle for us—namely that learners were to guide their learning of both the academic and the social curriculum, which budding teacher candidates misconstrued as their devising fun or hands-on activities for students that were then largely controlled by the teacher. As we traced the development of our current understandings, we recognized that for one of us, choice and voice manifested as a commitment to constructivism and the dignity and humanity of all, and for the other one of us it was shown as regular reference to many of the works of educational philosopher, John Dewey. This is to say that our disposition toward the moral component of democratic practice seemed more heightened than did those of the teacher candidates.

We were also aware from a previously-conducted pilot study that induction level teachers from our institution would frequently interpret “teaching for democracy” as implementing civic education as a part of social studies instruction (Santoyo & Kleine, 2018). This understanding was narrow and quite limited and alerted us that what we hoped teacher candidates were absorbing through our use of democratic practice was insufficient and perhaps needed to be more explicit.

Another way that we had seen pre-service teachers apply the more conservative version of democratic practice was in reverting to the use of “majority rules” voting on curriculum topics, even though they had learned to deliberate and use consensus decision-making on collaborative projects in our teacher preparation program. Additionally, a perennial pattern that we had observed was for teacher candidates to declare the need for control in classrooms and to identify the children as respectful if they were quiet and compliant. Commitment to teaching children how to make decisions as participants in a democracy and to resist being marginalized

went against their cultural norms of knowing one's place.

In probing our discourse to understand why these outcomes disappointed us, we found that our own conceptions of teaching for democracy had substantial moral elements with regard to cultural pluralism, protection of minority viewpoints, participation, and the Deweyan-influenced vision of learning to live in a community. Thus, two elements from Apple and Beane's (1995) explication seemed particularly applicable for our situation: (a) a sense of responsibility toward all people and a consideration of the "common good"; and (b) a sense of responsibility for maintaining the rights and dignity of historically marginalized populations. These two points resonated with us because, again, as former middle grades teachers, we had experienced the prejudice aimed at young adolescents and the common misconception of their capabilities that had a negative impact on their advancement throughout their schooling. We attempted to counter this all-too-frequent outcome by developing learners' self- (Bandura, 1977) and collective-efficacy (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2000) that are necessary for enacting a commitment to democratic practice.

Historically, children have not been considered capable of contributing to the common good, which Apple and Beane (1995) claim is a necessary condition of democratic education. Rather, students are seen as "receptacles to be filled" (Freire, 2005, p. 72), and their potential contributions to the learning process are ignored. A historical tendency to dismiss marginalized voices, including children's voices, contributes to the variety of definitions of democracy in education. For instance, one individual's version of good citizenship may be diametrically opposed to another's, as in countries that are surrounded by dictatorships or that have experienced a dictatorship relatively recently and may be hesitant to fully embrace democratic concepts (McCowan, 2009). Furthermore, studies have indicated that men and boys are more likely to be politically active than women and girls (Cicognani, Zani, Fournier, Gavray, & Born, 2012), contributing to the understanding that marginalized voices are not being heard.

Again informed by our middle level education background, we considered the degree to which institutions serving young people have been

permitted to be democratic. Barber (1997) reminds us that it is the "publicness" of public school that is the critical component lacking in the development of commitment to democratic practices. He argues that "public schools are not merely schools for the public, but schools of publicness: institutions where we learn what it means to be a public and start down the road towards common national and civic identity" (Barber, 1997, p. 3). As an inherently hierarchical institution traditionally run as a feudal system and where the public (students) are sidelined as spectators rather than central to decision-making and deliberation reserved for adults, polite young people are often reinforced for their reticence and reserve and not for their desire to be involved. McLaren (2015) vividly describes this silencing of children in their own education as "full-throated screams meet[ing] the immemorial silence of the pedagogical tradition" (p. 3). In other words, children are often shunted to the background and excluded from voicing opinions or concerns regarding their education. Relegation of this sort runs counter to several of Apple and Beane's (1995) democratic tenets to be upheld, including trust that individuals and groups can resolve problems and a responsibility to maintain the rights of historically marginalized populations. Stories of numerous children who demand to be heard and involved in their education yet who are then punished for "disrespect" convinced us that we must highlight and make explicit in our teaching the teachers' moral obligation to develop their own and young people's voices as a democratic practice.

How We Will Proceed

Our consultation of the literature along with analysis of our own positions coming into this project has provided us a foundation for taking the next steps in creating democratic curriculum experiences for teacher candidates beginning within a course module, the fruits of which we anticipate would impel them to enact such practices in the classrooms they enter as induction-level teachers. The broad conceptualization of democracy and the number of obstacles we have faced in fostering an abundantly democratic educational space have led us to filter through the possibilities to determine the critical aspects that we will intentionally concentrate on in our teacher preparation program. Through this process of conceptualizing democratic practice, we have also begun to operationalize those behaviors of

teacher candidates that will signal to us that democracy has become a part of the pedagogical practice of graduates of our teacher preparation program. Our foci follow from our own moral commitments and closely align to ethical elements of teaching for democracy that Apple and Beane (1995) identified as (a) a sense of responsibility toward all people and a consideration of the “common good”; and (b) a sense of responsibility for maintaining the rights and dignity of historically marginalized populations.

As a result of undertaking this inquiry, we thus determined that there are four categories that we believe should be the focus of the course and that will become learning outcomes to be assessed. The first learning outcome is based on the pervasive understanding that children are not capable of contributing to the common good and Cicognani and colleagues (2012) finding that women and girls are less likely to be politically active. Thus, teacher candidates should value and seek to amplify the voices of historically marginalized people, including children. Second, based on Cochran-Smith’s (1991) discussion of power dynamics creating disparate educational outcomes, teacher candidates should recognize that those in power must consider and work to meet the needs of those without power. The third and fourth outcomes are based on Apple and Beane’s (1995) study of democratic schools and their understanding of what democracy entails: Teacher candidates should recognize the disadvantage of homogeneity and the advantages of diversity, even at the potential expense of efficiency; and teacher candidates should value and engage in collaboration as a crucial component of teaching for democracy. Our values also align with two of the areas proposed in Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) framework for understanding teaching for democracy, participatory and justice-oriented, which reveal enactment of a more advanced conception of democracy. These learning outcomes will be addressed through purposeful scrutiny of current practices in the candidates’ educational settings.

This investigation was a valuable exercise in helping us understand and undertake the necessary work of teaching for democracy. We have become grounded in theories and models and have created an opportunity to identify our own orientations as teacher educators so that we can be more mindful and intentional about our

practice. We also believe that the curriculum we design will be more explicit and transformative than if we had tried to implement an intentionally democratic course without this degree of preparation. Finally, having collaborated on this project, we have had a democratic experience—one that enables us to understand each other better and share a vision of a more democratic educational system.

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