
Democracy & Education

A Book Review of *Education and Democracy in the 21st Century*

By Nel Noddings, Review by Xiuying “Sophy” Cai

IN HER NEW book, *Education and Democracy in the 21st Century*, Nel Noddings (2013) provides a vision of education as a multi-aim enterprise in which schools are responsible for all three domains of life: personal (home and family), occupational, and civic (domestic and global). She draws on Dewey’s foundational work on education, in particular, *Democracy and Education* (1916). The book is a necessary intervention, especially in an era when educational discourse, in the United States and around the world, is saturated with talks about standardization, accountability, common core, and test scores, etc. Noddings’s thesis is that we should replace some 20th-century thinking, such as about competition, bureaucracy, overspecialization, and standardization, with habits of cooperation, connection, and critical and creative thinking. As a philosopher and professor of education who had 15 years of public school experiences, Noddings argues that we must find ways in our educational aims and school curricula to preserve our commitment to democratic values laid out by Dewey almost a century ago while adapting to the societal changes since then. Noddings’s vision of education for the new millennium provides a critical turn in current educational discourse and educational reforms.

Education and Democracy in the 21st Century consists of eleven chapters. Focusing on American secondary schooling, Noddings begins with a critical examination of current educational ideas, such as standards, teacher accountability, and choice. She considers them from two different lenses. Her arguments are, instead of focusing on performance or content standards, as is the case in current educational reform, we should examine if students have the “standard” and equal opportunities to learn; rather than accountability, education should come more from a sense of responsibility; in addition to parent choice of school, student choice of school activities should be at the core of educational

choice. Noddings’s perspectives offer an alternative yet critical lens to think about current debates in educational reforms in the United States.

In chapter two, Noddings (2013) proceeds to discuss democracy and the democratic ideals in education. Following Dewey, Emerson, Whitman, and Gutmann, she considers democracy as participatory through deliberative thinking and communication (dialogue). She specifically examines, in chapter three, equality as a core concept in democracy and problematizes current struggles for equality through common curriculum, degrees, diplomas, etc. According to Noddings, “a reasonable approach to equal opportunity requires the recognition of differences in student talents and interests” (p. 27), which she maintains should be the focus of secondary schooling. In chapter four, Noddings argues that a closer look at the aims of education and a revitalization of the aims talk are essential to both democracy and education. She suggests “a hierarchy of ends: aims, goals, objectives” (p. 40). This is foundational in her argument to “teach from the top-down” (p. 108)—that is, to start with big pictures and big questions in education (*aims*) and then move down to specific *goals* and further down to detailed learning *objectives* for each lesson in all disciplines.

With the discussions on current problems and democratic values in education in the first four chapters, in the following

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chapters, Noddings (2013) mainly challenges “the present organization of the curriculum into specialized subjects that rarely make connections across disciplines and almost totally ignore the great existential questions” (p. 57). She explores the place of the liberal arts in contemporary education (chapter five), including the possibilities to include aims from the personal, occupational, and civic domains into the curriculum and connect the disciplines to each other and to life itself. She considers various aims of education for home life and parenting (chapter six), for ecological cosmopolitanism and peace on earth (chapter seven), for vocational development (chapter eight), for moral and spiritual life (chapter nine), and for national and global citizenship (chapter ten). In chapter eleven, the last chapter, she exercises critical thinking in revisiting the problems raised in the beginning of the book. She summarizes her argument as ecological, searching for a balance in our thinking about education to support satisfying ways of life for the whole person in accordance with the aims of the 21st century.

Noddings (2013) provides a vision for education in the 21st century that is especially urgent in the current educational context in the United States. The contemporary proliferation of discourses, such as U.S. public schools are failing relative to international test scores, not only reduces education to standardized test scores but also has the effect of pushing all educators to be accountable to reform U.S. schools to “out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world” (p. 2). Noddings worries that such discourses may reclaim the habits of dominance and war and, therefore, situate competition as the major theme of our world. In contrast, she urges us to embrace collaboration, global democracy, and ecological cosmopolitanism as the aims of education for the 21st century.

Noddings’s (2013) argument for 21st-century education is comprehensive in two ways. First, she contends that we should teach from the big picture and from the fundamental *aims* of education. This vision is comprehensive in that it is not an argument for any fragmentary reforms in education, such as learning outcomes based on test scores or Common Core curriculum, but an argument for the fundamental aims of education in the new millennium and how they can be realized through disciplinary goals and specific lesson objectives. With plenty of examples, she emphasizes again and again throughout her book that she does not intend to present an actual curriculum but suggest a way of thinking. Second, she calls for an education not just for intellectual development but also for an ecological balance of all three great domains of life for the whole person: personal, occupational, and civic. She argues that we should organize the disciplines as connected to each other and to life itself. She uses examples from her rich personal experiences from her work in public schools to illustrate her vision. Although some of the examples are anecdotal and at times hard to follow, she reminds us again and again to look at the big pictures and big questions in education for the 21st century.

Noddings’s (2013) main approach to achieve her aims is to “stretch the disciplines from within” (pp. 47, 62–64, 69). She suggests that the basic structure of curriculum in the United States will not face dramatic change in the foreseeable future. Therefore,

she maintains that we have to work within the disciplinary structure of English, mathematics, social studies, science, and foreign languages, etc. Her proposal is conservative in this sense, but it is also to some extent practical to re-envision the curriculum and pedagogy to achieve the 21st-century educational aims. One way to stretch disciplines from within, as she suggests, is to encourage more interdisciplinary work across subject matters and through what she calls “lateral excursions” (p. 62). She says, “wherever possible we should start our units of study with big ideas as suggested by E. O. Wilson—not with unmotivated details—and then move down the line to details as they are needed and laterally to the consequences or relations in other disciplines” (p. 62). Noddings suggests on many occasions that all teachers—from all disciplines—should be English teachers, especially in helping students to master standard oral English. However, as Noddings herself recognizes in the book, the concept of “standard oral English” is subject to critical scrutiny. Whose “standard oral English” is it? The concept, as Delpit (1995) argues, involves complicated power relations. Likewise, Noddings’ calls to stretch disciplines from within and do more interdisciplinary work are also subject to dynamic power relations related to how different disciplines are recognized in our society, including among educators and policymakers. The current “triumph” of STEM fields over humanities and liberal arts is an example. Recognizing these power relations complicates Noddings’s vision and her approach. Teachers and educators should consider these dynamics as they engage with Noddings’s work.

Noddings raises many important philosophical questions about education and schooling for us to think about, including retreading a longstanding discussion in the philosophy of education about how the two are different. Noddings’s effort attempts to bridge the two, though with difficulties. While maintaining the aims of educating for global democracy in the 21st century, she discusses the possibilities in secondary schooling to achieve those educational aims. While I am not particularly convinced that education in the 21st century is inherently different from education in the 20th century (or even that there is any clear mark between 20th and 21st centuries), I agree with her that we need to embrace collaboration more than competition, think about responsibility rather than accountability, and recognize interconnection between different disciplines, countries, and realms of life instead of separating and overspecializing them. I recommend this book to secondary school teachers, pre-service teachers, and teacher-educators as a starting point to think about big-picture educational aims and to explore ways of realizing them in our curricula and pedagogy.

References

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