# Democracy & Education

# Toward a Transformative Criticality for Democratic Citizenship Education

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## Abstract

This article uses a well-received recent text—Hess and McAvoy's *The Political Classroom*—to suggest that democratic citizenship education today has a social accountability problem. I locate this discussion in the context of a longstanding conflict between the critical thinking approach to democratic citizenship education, the approach typified by *The Political Classroom*, and the critical pedagogical approach, which has an equal but opposite problem, that of indoctrination. If democratic citizenship educators are truly interested in transforming the social order, I suggest, then we need to listen appreciatively, and respond thoughtfully, to critiques of the approach we favor. The article ends by outlining a possible way forward, by means of a concept I term "transformative criticality." I suggest that such an approach to criticality is enacted in another well-received recent volume in the field, Stitzlein's *Teaching for Dissent*.

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*The balcony of the Adams High School auditorium is filled with students, teachers, and administrators who are skipping lunch to watch the senior class legislate. Even the local mayor is in the audience. They are observing more than 200 seniors who are dressed in crisp shirts, dresses, and suits and ties. On the theater floor there is a hum of anticipation. . . . Students huddle in deep discussion; several are clutching prepared comments as they pace near one of two microphones standing in the aisles. Majority and minority leaders, and a bevy of more than 20 whips, are busily directing and organizing their peers. . . . On the stage, the Speaker of the House sits at a table reviewing the docket with the Sergeant at Arms. The bell rings, and with a loud bang, the speaker's gavel signals that the session will resume. (p. 85)*

This passage from Hess and McAvoy's (2015) recent volume, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Citizenship*, paints a vivid, compelling picture of a legislative simulation at a school Hess and McAvoy have called Adams High. Here, students

deliberate controversial political issues, aiming to come to agreements about policy alternatives. By so doing, Hess and McAvoy argue, they learn to participate skillfully in the public sphere, supporting their views with informed reasons and listening generously to those with whom they disagree.

Adams High is a case, Hess and McAvoy (2015) contend, of "inclusive participation," and yet a second passage from the same chapter draws a less inclusive picture. Amanda, a high-achieving student and one of the only Black students in her class, reported that, in response to her objections to a proposed ban on affirmative action, classmates told her, "We don't want to hear your facts." She reported feeling that her views "were often dismissed by her classmates" (p. 104). Despite this and other evidence that the legislative simulation may have been less inclusive than the authors claimed, Amanda's experience receives less than a paragraph; meanwhile, the paragraphs immediately following repeats the volume's common refrain: "Through the process of reasoning," the authors maintain, "perspectives are broadened" (p. 104).

I use this episode from *The Political Classroom*, arguably one of the best recent works in the field, to point out that American democratic citizenship education today has a social accountability problem. That is, respected democratic citizenship educators—Hess and McAvoy included—have embraced classroom deliberation not only as "best practice," but indeed as a cure for what ails our democracy. In this article, I argue that democratic citizenship educators' faith in deliberation's inclusive and socially transformative potential renders them inappropriately inattentive to the real challenges that social inequality poses to deliberative democracy.

I locate this discussion in the contenxt of a longstanding conflict between the critical thinking approach to democratic education—as typified by *The Political Classroom*, with its social accountability problem—and the critical pedagogical approach, which has an equal but opposite problem, that of indoctrination. In the latter part of the article, I propose a possible way forward, through a concept I term "transformative criticality." To illustrate, I use another well-received recent volume in the field: Stitzlein's (2014) hopeful and pragmatic book, *Teaching for Dissent*.

Before proceeding, I would like to put my cards on the table: I identify as a critical pedagogical scholar, in that I believe schools can and should prepare young people to participate skillfully in the struggle to bring about a more just world. Given my critical pedagogical commitments, and critical thinking's status as "best practice," this article concerns itself more with the widespread influence of critical thinking's social accountability problem than with the more limited influence of critical pedagogy's (admittedly often real) indoctrination problem. That said, if democratic citizenship educators truly want to transform the social order, we must listen and respond to critiques of our favored approaches. For me, this entails learning to read the critical thinkers generously and engage with their perspectives in ways that lend my own critical work greater capacity to be convincing. I hope this inquiry might avail the critical thinkers something similar: an ability to speak in ways that critical pedagogues like myself can hear and appreciate.

## Critical Thinking: Characteristics and Limitations

Published nearly two decades ago, Burbules and Berk's (1999) paper distinguishing critical thinking from critical pedagogy remains a useful tool for conceptualizing widely divergent uses of the term "critical" in educational research today. In this and the next section, I draw on Burbules and Berk's framework to outline key characteristics of critical thinking and then of critical pedagogy. I explore how each orientation has been taken up by democratic citizenship educators and conclude each of the two sections by sketching the orientation's limitations.

Those favoring critical thinking, Burbules and Berk (1999) explained, aim to produce young people who can make thoughtful, well-substantiated choices about their values and behavior. The critical thinking approach advocates giving and seeking reasons and evidence; from this perspective, social ills arise from "irrational, illogical, and unexamined living" (p. 46). While proponents disagree over the extent to which critical thinking ought to focus on morals or ideology (Johnson & Morris, 2010, p. 79), in general they eschew an ideological orientation toward building a more just world in favor of a logical orientation toward producing thoughtful and reasonable people. In democratic citizenship education, I suggest, this aim elicits a *pluralist* conception of who is involved, a set of strategies dependent on *political autonomy*, and the cultivation of the disposition Burbules (1995) has labeled *reasonableness*.

For classroom deliberation to be high-quality—for it be effectively transformative—many citizenship educators who favor the critical thinking approach advocate pluralism (Johnson, 2016; Parker, 1996, 2003). They value difference and disagreement as desirable—not as problems to be avoided or suppressed. Pluralists view diversity "as a deliberative asset" because difference "motivates individuals to justify their proposals with appeals to justice" and "contributes to social knowledge" (Parker, 2003, p. 97; see also Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). In other words, diversity allows more possibilities to be considered, and this renders justice a necessary criterion in decision-making. Pluralism benefits democracy, then, by preventing it from devolving into monolithic tyranny. From this perspective, tolerance is key: To take full advantage of the opportunities difference avails us, we must respect others' rights to hold views we find objectionable.

Political autonomy—the "capacity to make un-coerced decisions" (Parker, 2014, p. 357)—is understood by critical thinking proponents to contribute to a democracy's well-being. From this perspective, individuals must be free to choose the values and beliefs to which they ascribe, neither mindlessly adhering to the dominant view nor being forced or coerced into doing so. Politically autonomous citizens are able to articulate their own concepts of "the good life" (Gutmann, 1999) and to tolerate others' views, even when these views compete with their own. Indeed, a liberal democracy requires citizens to be tolerant, independent critical thinkers, so schooling must aim not to indoctrinate them but instead—somewhat paradoxically—to "shape them into the kind of people who decide for themselves what shape they will take" (Parker, 2014, p. 353). Political autonomy and classroom deliberation are viewed, from this perspective, as mutually reinforcing: Young people need opportunities to participate in decision-making in order to develop their autonomy, and they need to develop their own values and beliefs in order to decide.

A central disposition of the critical thinking approach to democratic citizenship education is what Burbules (1995) has

called reasonableness. In response to postmodern and feminist critiques of reason and rationality—the critique, for example, that "reason" privileges a Western, patriarchal worldview—Burbules proposed this more modest and contingent concept. For Burbules, reasonableness indicated "a practice growing out of communicative interactions in which the full play of human thought, feeling, and motivation operate" (p. 85). Whereas rationality tends to privilege logical deduction and a search for universal truths, reasonableness, in his view, arises from "practical, social" activities like speaking, listening, and reflection and may not be generalizable to all people. Reasonableness seeks an outcome to which participants, after careful deliberation, are willing to consent.

One of the critical pedagogues' primary critiques of critical thinking is that it makes a false claim to ideological neutrality. Burbules and Berk (1999) explained that, according to the critical pedagogical view, deliberation is never neutral but rather arises from and therefore favors a Western, patriarchal worldview (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Sanders, 1997). Burbules's own (1995) more contingent definition of reasonableness notwithstanding, the critical pedagogues suggest deliberation cannot escape an intrinsic bias in favor of certain cultural perspectives at the expense of others. It places a Western, liberal humanist emphasis on the individual at the expense of the collective and masquerades as equitable while favoring dominant identities and ideologies.

Not only is deliberation biased, from this view, but so is the society in which we live: Through popular culture and media, and through schooling itself, our society cultivates conventional assumptions while suppressing other values and ways of seeing the world. As Burbules and Berk (1999) explained, from the critical pedagogical perspective, "indoctrination is the case already; students must be brought to criticality, and this can only be done by alerting them to the social conditions that have brought this about" (p. 55). The umbrella critique—the one Burbules and Berk endorsed as "the most challenging critique" of critical thinking—is that it fails to attend to people's lived experience of inequality. "Critical Thinking needs to be questioned from the standpoint of social accountability," they wrote. "It needs to be asked what difference it makes to people's real lives" (p. 58).

## Critical Pedagogy: Characteristics and Limitations

Whereas critical thinking focuses on the skillful use of reasons and evidence, remaining relatively agnostic as to content, critical pedagogy focuses on the hegemony of dominant ideologies and the resulting oppression of marginalized social groups (or those whom Spivak [1988] has termed "the subaltern"). Proponents "raise questions about inequalities of power, about the false myths of opportunity and merit for many students, and about the way belief systems become internalized" (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 50). Rather than accepting the status quo, critical pedagogues hope learners and teachers together will develop what Freire (1970/2008) termed *conscientização*—often translated as "critical consciousness." This attitude concerns itself with "social relations, social institutions, and social traditions that create and maintain conditions of oppression" (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p. 53). In democratic citizenship education,

I want to suggest, critical pedagogy is characterized by a *solidarity*-based conception of who is involved, a strategy centered around *social justice activism*, and a disposition to *critique*.

Whereas the deliberative ideal favored by critical-thinking-oriented democratic citizenship educators values pluralism—the idea that difference is an asset to decision-making—critical pedagogical citizenship educators favor a broadened conception of difference, via the notion of solidarity. This is the idea that our differences may be balanced by our interdependence and shared human experience. Rorty (1989) argued that we must "extend our sense of 'we' to people whom we have previously thought of as 'they'" (p. 192). For Rorty, those of us who benefit from inequality can and should develop solidarity by attending to our common experiences of suffering—that is, by "increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people" (p. xvi).[1]

Solidarity denotes a rejection or even reversal of hierarchies, undermining existing power dynamics by positioning the oppressed as agents and knowers, while positioning the oppression's beneficiaries as allies rather than saviors. Freire (1970/2008) emphasized that a pedagogy of the oppressed must be "forged *with*, not *for* the oppressed." His "radical . . . is not afraid to meet the people or enter into dialogue with them" and "does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but . . . does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side" (p. 113). The definition of political solidarity I use in this article echoes Freire's emphasis on the responsibilities of the oppressor. With their "political solidarity model of social change," Subašić, Reynolds, and Turner (2008) have also advocated such a definition: According to this model, "the majority . . . come to embrace the minority's cause as its own" (p. 331). Political solidarity, from this perspective, entails alliances among actors from divergent backgrounds—the privileged and the marginalized alike.

Whereas the critical thinking approach to democratic citizenship education values reasonableness, with its level-headed exchange of ideas, critical pedagogical scholars tend to favor a disposition toward critique that may become intemperate. They attend to inequality's systemic nature, condemning the everyday social processes that hold inequality in place, and advocating for change. In contrast to the careful weighing of alternatives and tempered civility of the deliberative classroom, critical pedagogy maintains that emotions are intrinsic to criticality. Levine and Nierras's (2007) interviews with sixty activists, for example, found a recurring emphasis on the "legitimate need to express anger, grief, and other powerful emotions" (p. 13). And Purpel (1999), noting

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1   As Rorty (1989) and Freire (1970/2008) have conceptualized it, solidarity is undertaken by those who benefit from inequality, in concert with those who are harmed by it. Of course, solidarity is and ought to be undertaken among marginalized groups, independent of their relation to the privileged (e.g., Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991). In the context of public education, however, most teachers, administrators, and other decision-makers benefit from racial, economic, and other forms of privilege, and this article's definition of solidarity takes that into account.

that public education has "contributed to and colluded with . . . structured inequality, rationed dignity, rationalized privilege, and self-righteous hierarchy," responded with "moral outrage at the unnecessary pain and suffering" such ideologies reproduce (pp. 188–189). For critical pedagogues, like many justice-oriented activists today, powerful emotions are an appropriate—indeed, a reasonable—response to inequality and injustice.

Finally, while the critical thinking approach to democratic citizenship education values political autonomy—the idea that young people should decide for themselves what "shape they will take"—the critical pedagogical approach values committed social justice activism. Here, young people learn to build and take part in social movements and nonviolent direct action designed to challenge an unjust status quo (e.g., Kirshner, 2015). Critical pedagogues do not assume that deciding leads naturally to implementation; rather, students need to be taught to translate their political voice into political influence (Allen & Light, 2015). As Peterson (2014) has argued, "if we envision education for democracy as a means of developing in students a facility for actively participating in identifying and then opposing injustices in society, then we must move beyond teaching them to voice their objections" (p. 6). In addition to teaching young people to exchange reasons and agree on policies, Peterson claimed, educators must support young people in developing skills for nonviolent action.

One of the critical thinkers' primary concerns about critical pedagogy, Burbules and Berk (1999) explained, is that it may entail indoctrinating students to a particular worldview. "Teaching students to think critically must include allowing them to come to their own conclusions," this perspective holds, "yet critical pedagogy seems to come dangerously close to prejudging what those conclusions must be" (p. 54). A thorough exploration of why critical pedagogical approaches sometimes stray into the territory of indoctrination is outside the scope of the article. However, I do want to point out the approach's general inattentiveness to practical questions of curriculum and instruction (Deng, 2015; M. Young, 2011, 2013). In the absence of "detailed examinations of what actually happens in schools" (Apple, 2015, p. xv)—such as those that Hess and McAvoy and other critical thinkers have often undertaken—teachers favoring a critical pedagogical orientation may have few models for teaching about oppression in ways that do not tell students what to think.

From the critical thinking perspective, then, critical pedagogues inculcate students with leftist political values (such as anticapitalism and opposition to globalization, working-class solidarity, green politics, feminism and LGBTQ rights, and multiculturalism or antiracism). Insofar as critical pedagogy views all social relations through a lens of oppression and domination, critical thinkers charge, "everything is up for questioning within critical pedagogy except the categories and premises of critical pedagogy itself" (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 56). The umbrella critique here—what Burbules and Berk (1999) described as "the most challenging critique"—is that critical pedagogy fails to examine its own ironically hegemonic tendencies. "Critical Pedagogy needs to be questioned," they argued, regarding

"whether it is simply a more egalitarian and humane way of steering students toward certain foregone conclusions" (p. 58).[2]

## Criticality at an Impasse

Despite their differences, critical thinking and critical pedagogy share some worthy goals. Both aspire to social transformation, as contrasted with the competing educational purpose of "transmission" (Stanley, 1992). Those who advocate education for transmission aim to prepare young people to participate skillfully in society in its current form and, by so doing, to reproduce current configurations of institutional and power hierarchies. Although transmission-style approaches are among the most influential in American citizenship education (see Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006, on civic republicanism), both critical thinking and critical pedagogy reject this model. Instead, they aim to use schooling, and democratic citizenship education specifically, to transform the social order. They share a desire to overcome ignorance and to support young people in making decisions based on more accurate understandings of social reality than often hold sway in the American political sphere.

And yet, despite their transformative aspirations, Burbules and Berk have observed, both critical thinking and critical pedagogy have grown ironically uncritical about the most significant limitations to their transformative capacity. Each viewing the other as "*insufficiently* critical" (p. 56), both sides have become increasingly adamant about their exclusive capacity to transform society—whether society appears to be transforming or not. Indeed, this ideological amplification has real consequences for democratic citizenship education, and the type of society to which it contributes. Critical pedagogy may be influential in the academy, but it is rare in classrooms (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006), arguably because of justifiable concerns about political indoctrination. On the other hand, critical thinking is commonly viewed as a "best practice" approach to democratic citizenship education, but its limitations as far as social accountability give cause for real concern, as Hess and McAvoy's *Political Classroom* has recently exemplified.

## Democratic Citizenship Education's Social Accountability Problem: Limitations of a "Best Practice" Approach

*The Political Classroom*, I suggest, epitomizes the critical thinking approach to democratic citizenship education. Grounded in the belief that "schools are, and ought to be, political sites," the book takes a sympathetic look at a challenging paradox for democratic citizenship educators. Namely, schools must "provide students with a nonpartisan political education" while also preparing them "to participate in the actual, highly partisan political community" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 4). To these ends, Hess and McAvoy (2015) advocate classroom deliberation of controversial political issues and describe the results of an ambitious mixed-method longitudinal study of high school social studies courses featuring such deliberation. In the three case studies their volume highlights,

2   See Hytten's recent (2015) article in *Democracy & Education* for a thoughtful response to such charges.

students reported an increased "appreciation for the complexity of political issues" (p. 53); a greater tendency to discuss politics outside of class (p. 55); and an enthusiasm for "being inducted into the world of adult discourse" (p. 58). Inasmuch as these dispositions are rare among American youth, the authors' claim about the transformative potential of classroom deliberation is sound: These are indeed "values that would make a stronger democracy" (p. 7).

*The Political Classroom* has been widely celebrated (American Educational Research Association, 2016; Brighouse, 2015; Lo, 2015; Tiflati, 2015), and this response is deserved. In contrast to many critical pedagogical volumes on curriculum (e.g., Apple, 2004; Au, 2012), Hess and McAvoy's (2015) book investigates day-to-day instructional practices in real classrooms. Since the publication of *Controversy in the Classroom* (2009), Hess's work has given classroom teachers (including me) the courage to introduce contentious political issues into our classrooms and to open these issues to debate. This contribution to democratic citizenship education is invaluable. That said, I agree with Wegwert's (2015) recent argument that Hess and McAvoy's book does not go far enough. As Wegwert put it, "the strategies offered in *The Political Classroom* are necessary but not sufficient" for contributing to social transformation. My aim, in highlighting *The Political Classroom*'s limitations, is not to pick on this particular volume or its authors; in fact, I quite like the book. And yet I worry about democratic citizenship educators' wide agreement that the values expressed therein constitute the best of democratic citizenship education practice.

The critical thinking characteristics of *pluralism*, *political autonomy*, and *reasonableness* are central to *The Political Classroom*. In the remainder of this section, I sketch how the book expresses these characteristics and then discuss some limitations by drawing on Sanders's (1997) provocative argument against deliberation. I draw on one more student experience reported in Hess and McAvoy's discussion, an anecdote that illustrates the limitations Sanders describes. The section that follows proposes an alternative approach to citizenship education.

Hess and McAvoy's (2015) endorsement of classroom deliberation aligns with the pluralist perspective that difference is an asset to deliberation, rather than an impediment. They argue that inviting young people to deliberate authentic political controversies increases their awareness of and appreciation for diverse perspectives, which is surely true. However, as indicated by their too-brief discussion of Amanda's experience, they do not take seriously the real challenges that social inequality poses to their pluralist ideals. Amanda's report that her white classmates told her "we don't want to hear your facts"—a report that seems to challenge Hess and McAvoy's claims about this school's inclusivity—is left almost entirely unexamined.

Similarly, their emphasis on political autonomy has much to offer, but autonomy's limitations remain unexplored. Consider the cautionary example of a teacher Hess and McAvoy call Ms. Potter, who used a simulation on wealth inequality to advocate her own leftist perspectives on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East during the Iraq War. The authors rightly point out that such airings of a teacher's opinions "communicate to students that there is one view—or one reasonable view—and oversimplify complex political issues" (p. 81). In the anecdote of Ms. Potter, and throughout *The Political Classroom*, the authors reiterate how such (arguably critical pedagogical) approaches risk indoctrinating students and can interfere with political autonomy. And yet, Hess and McAvoy pay little attention to the cultural bias that accompanies autonomy's origins in Western liberal humanism or this value's individualist nature (see, e.g., Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Knight Abowitz and Harnish, 2006). These are valid concerns that need to be taken up.

Finally, like other democratic citizenship educators and researchers, Hess and McAvoy (2015) emphasize reasonableness. This value appears in *The Political Classroom* in at least two forms. First is in the value placed upon "reasonable views" over unreasonable ones. For Hess and McAvoy, a view is unreasonable if it violates democratic values such as equality or political engagement (p. 76). Because exchanging reasons requires citizens to talk and listen to one another respectfully, a second form of reasonableness involves what teachers in the study labeled "civil discourse." The authors characterize the distinction between civil and uncivil political talk by drawing on students' own terminology, contrasting a "passionate" discussion with one that might "get out of hand" (p. 95). And while Hess and McAvoy do take pains to emphasize disagreement's value to deliberation, they do not consider that some political issues might evoke intemperate disagreements or that some people might be less likely to be perceived as reasonable, regardless of what they say or how they say it.

In her provocative essay "Against Deliberation," Sanders (1997) argued that deliberation is often counterproductive because "what happens when American citizens talk to each other is often neither truly deliberative nor really democratic" (p. 349). She observed that spelling out standards of respectful discourse such as "address[ing] each other as equals" and "offering reasonable, morally justifiable arguments"—presumably the kinds of norms established in the classrooms Hess and McAvoy described—provides no guarantee that such norms will be achieved. "The careful articulation of these formal standards," she wrote, "is a far cry from an assessment of the probability of meeting them" (p. 348). Moreover, when facilitators do articulate such standards, whether in the context of a teacher instructing a class or a judge instructing a jury, she pointed out, this can create a false impression that the demands of respectful discourse have been addressed, and require no further attention—except perhaps in cases of gratuitous, and ostensibly anomalous, violations.

Indeed, because some citizens are more likely than others to articulate arguments in so-called rational terms, Sanders (1997) argued, respectful and inclusive deliberation may appear to be proceeding when it is not. In such cases,

> we may . . . mistakenly decide that conditions of mutual respect have been achieved by deliberators. In this way, taking deliberation as a signal of democratic practice paradoxically works undemocratically, discrediting on seemingly democratic grounds the views of those who are less likely to present their arguments in ways that we recognize as characteristically deliberative. (p. 349)

Sanders went on to explain that, in our political culture, those with less experience presenting their arguments in such ways are often those "already underrepresented in formal political institutions and . . . systematically materially disadvantaged"—including women, people of color, and the poor. These people tend not only to have less experience making arguments recognizable by others as reasonable—"no matter how worthy or true" their perspectives—but, because of the insidious and often invisible dynamics of prejudice, such people are also less likely to be listened to even when their statements conform to the conventions of rational discourse (p. 349). Thus, for example, the often thoughtfully articulated and well-supported concerns of Black Lives Matter activists have frequently been dismissed as irrational (Jerde, 2015), uninformed (Lu, 2015), or even racist (Mendoza, 2015). Sanders attributed such dismissals to structural and identity-based inequalities in what she called "epistemological authority," or "the capacity to evoke acknowledgement of one's arguments" (p. 349; see also I. M. Young, 1996).

This article began by using Amanda's story to illustrate a problem with Hess and McAvoy's (2015) ostensibly-best-practice approach to democratic citizenship education. In another, somewhat more elaborated example from the volume, a conservative Mexican American student named Gabe reported having overheard other Republican students saying, "Get out of here," and, "Go back to Mexico," during the legislative simulation's deliberation of an immigration bill on the House floor. He responded by deciding to share his own experience as an immigrant with the assembly, breaking with his own party and advocating for the Democrats' proposed legislation. Afterward, Gabe recalled that his classmates "kind of quieted down and they stopped making racial slurs . . . I was happy I had made an impact on the way they were acting." He explained that the simulation improved his confidence "to stand up and say 'this is what I see,'" and, for this reason, in Hess and McAvoy's view, the incident supplied a "powerful" opportunity for Gabe to learn to speak out against racist views (p. 103). To be sure, this was likely an important incident in the development of Gabe's political autonomy.

While I share Hess and McAvoy's (2015) enthusiasm for Gabe's courage, and for the empowerment he felt as a result, I want to suggest that their interpretations of Gabe's and Amanda's experiences reveal limitations of the deliberative ideal—"from the standpoint," as Burbules and Berk (1999) put it, "of social accountability." Deliberations over affirmative action, in Amanda's case, and immigration, in Gabe's case, opened doors for dismissive and arguably racist attitudes to be aired in the classroom, with no evident structures in place to hold the perpetrators, their peers, the teachers, or the curriculum accountable. These episodes illustrate, in microcosm, one of democracy's most persistent problems: that is, the potential tyranny of a majority. In *On Liberty*, Mill (1859/1956) conceptualized the tyranny of the majority by arguing that, in a representative democracy, "society can and does execute its own mandates: and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right . . . it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression" (p. 4).

While it may be excessive to view the legislative simulation that Hess and McAvoy (2015) described as "political oppression," it is, on the other hand, naïve to assume that reasoned deliberation in and of itself promotes the safety of its participants. And yet the brevity of the book's discussion of such incidents—together they receive about three pages in a volume of more than 200—suggests that Hess and McAvoy view them as anomalies, rare eruptions of disrespect in a deliberative curriculum built for, and usually successful at achieving, inclusivity and respect. The pluralist perspective that difference is an asset in deliberation would appear to impede, in this case, earnest exploration of the challenges such difference may occasion—particularly when students' experiences and status are not merely different, but unequal. Thus, from the standpoint of social accountability, Hess and McAvoy's claims about Adams High's inclusivity underestimate the complexity and urgency of creating a truly inclusive classroom.

Amanda's and Gabe's experiences at Adams High, in my view, bear out Sanders's (1997) claim about the limitations of deliberation. For Amanda in particular—who was told "we don't want to hear your facts"—it is evident that her capacity to make arguments heard, no matter how well-reasoned and thoughtfully-prepared, was limited by peers' perceptions of her epistemological authority. Hess and McAvoy (2015) remain silent on the experiences of students less adept at conforming to the conventions of rational deliberation, or those who had internalized the belief that they have no right to speak (I. M. Young, 1996). Rather, in the "best practice discussion" classrooms they describe, students' social status is treated as a nonissue. The authors imply that classroom deliberation, when well-implemented, is so inclusive as to overcome all but the most gratuitous incidents of bias and marginalization. Amanda's and Gabe's experiences suggest otherwise.

*The Political Classroom*'s widespread warm reception reflects critical thinking's current dominance in democratic citizenship education. The field's enthusiasm for classroom deliberation is warranted, yet many citizenship educators favoring the critical thinking approach suffer from a dismissive attitude toward the real challenges of social inequality. Meanwhile, though critical pedagogy offers a robust answer to problems of social accountability, Ms. Potter's story offers an existence proof about the risks of indoctrination. For researchers and practitioners who favor critical thinking and prioritize political autonomy, these risks make critical pedagogy untenable. However, in the absence of the social accountability that critical pedagogy might supply, even the best scholarly work in the field—which Hess and McAvoy's (2015) book, in my view, exemplifies—offers limited capacity for genuine social transformation in service of building a healthier democracy and a more just world.

## Toward a Transformative Criticality for Democratic Citizenship Education

Burbules and Berk (1999) proposed that educational scholars interested in rehabilitating criticality must acknowledge the limitations of our favored approach, attending generously to what other approaches might avail us. They called for an "alternate criticality" that embraces the tensions between critical thinking

and critical pedagogy, thereby allowing us to "think in new ways" (pp. 59-60). In the balance of this article, I take up Burbules and Berk's call for a different approach to criticality—a criticality that accepts the limitations of each approach, makes generative use of the tensions between them, and thereby allows us to think differently about what transformative schooling requires. I end by recommending, as a possible exemplar of this alternative approach, Stitzlein's (2014) volume *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and Political Activism.*

In response to Burbules and Berk's (1999) call for an alternate version of what it means to be critical, I would like to propose the term *transformative criticality.* This term acknowledges both approaches' shared transformational aspirations and takes up Burbules and Berk's recommendation that we cultivate acceptance of the limitations of our favored approach and attend with an open mind to the resources other approaches offer. I undertake this work in a conciliatory and pragmatist spirit akin to Dewey's (1902), as exemplified in his essay *The Child and the Curriculum.* Introducing his distinction between the supposed unity and spontaneity of the child, and the ostensibly stable and orderly logic of the curriculum, Dewey observed:

> *Easier than thinking with surrender of already formed ideas and detachment from facts already learned is just to stick by what is already said, looking about for something with which to buttress it against attack. Thus sects arise: schools of opinion. Each selects that set of conditions that appeals to it; and then erects them into a complete and independent truth, instead of treating them as a factor in a problem, needing adjustment. (p. 182)*

The concept of transformative criticality I articulate aims to follow Dewey's example: It treats the competing characteristics of critical thinking and critical pedagogy as factors in need of adjustment, in order more effectively to address the problem of schooling for social transformation.

In democratic citizenship education, a transformative criticality acknowledges the damage social inequality inflicts on the deliberative ideal and supports young people in drawing informed conclusions about how social problems—perhaps most important, inequality itself—ought to be addressed. This section proposes

some key characteristics of a transformative criticality for democratic citizenship education. These include Apple's (2014) concept of *decentered unities* as a way of conceptualizing who is involved; a strategy that answers Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) call for both *participatory and justice-oriented citizenship education*; and a few thoughts of my own, inspired by a pragmatist philosophical tradition, regarding cultivating a disposition of *wholeheartedness* in democratic citizenship education.

Despite his well-known critical pedagogical allegiances, Apple crossed the aisle, as it were, to publish *The Political Classroom* in the Critical Social Thought series he edits for Routledge. His notion of "decentered unities" draws on both the critical thinkers' pluralist values, and the critical pedagogues' emphasis on solidarity. Decentered unities, Apple (2014) has explained, are areas of "common ground" among diverse groups, whereby "joint struggles can be engaged in ways that do not subsume each group under the leadership of only one understanding" (p. 13). Such coalitions share critical thinkers' emphasis on difference, *and* critical pedagogues' emphasis on solidarity. As Apple put it, "a richer and more diverse 'we' can be built based not on false and romantic notions that we can all share in each other's pain, but on a recognition that alliances when possible are crucial to strategies of interruption" (p. 94). Embracing decentered unities may encourage us to appeal more widely to others, including to those who may not appear to be natural allies (for example, consider the so-called Cowboy and Indian Alliance, whereby indigenous groups and nonindigenous ranchers banded together to oppose the Keystone XL pipeline). With practical emphasis on building coalitions to interrupt problematic social phenomena—and without necessarily specifying what kind of phenomena ought to be interrupted—decentered unities are useful in developing a transformative approach to criticality.

In their influential empirical study of citizenship education programs in the United States, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified three common approaches. The first, "personally responsible citizenship," emphasizes volunteerism and obedience and enacts a model of social transmission rather than social transformation. The authors rejected this model due to its message that "citizenship does not require democratic governments, politics, or even collective endeavors" (p. 244). Two other models,

Table 1. Three Approaches to Criticality

|  | *Critical Thinking* | *Critical Pedagogy* | *Transformative Criticality* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Actors* | **Pluralism:** individual and group difference as an asset to deliberation | **Political Solidarity:** the majority embrace the minority's cause | **"Decentered Unities":** areas of common ground not reducible to one understanding |
| *Strategies* | **Political Autonomy:** cultivating individual capacity to make un-coerced decisions | **Social Justice Activism:** cultivating collective capacity to build and take part in social movements | **Participatory + Justice-Oriented Citizenship:** cultivating both engagement and dissent |
| *Dispositions* | **Reasonableness:** civilly seeking an outcome to which deliberators are willing to consent | **Critique:** cultivating attitudes of urgency and outrage in the face of oppression | **Wholeheartedness:** acknowledging suffering and cultivating pragmatic hopefulness |

however, were described more favorably. "Participatory citizenship" emphasizes training students to engage with government and community organizations and to "develop strategies for accomplishing collective tasks," while "justice-oriented citizenship" teaches young people to "question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time" (p. 240). If educators aim to support students in developing capacities "for critical analysis and social change" as well as "committed civic act[ion]" (p. 245), Westheimer and Kahne argued, they must "give explicit attention to both." I propose that models of democratic citizenship education emphasizing both collective action and deliberation might increase the discipline's capacity to contribute to social transformation. The increasingly popular method of action civics (Gingold, 2013; Levinson, 2012; Millenson, Mills, & Andes, 2014) is a promising example.[3]

Finally, I want to propose the concept of *wholeheartedness* as a possible characteristic of transformative criticality for democratic citizenship education. Where the critical thinkers tend to favor reasonableness, with its emphasis on the dispassionate cultivation of liberal democratic values, and the critical pedagogues tend to favor critique, with its emphasis on the fervent communication of moral urgency, a transformative criticality attends wholeheartedly to the possibility that some contexts call for level-headedness and measured deliberation, while others require impassioned outcry. Wholeheartedness arises from humans' essential impulse to care—to live, as Purpel (1989) has put it, "a coherent life of ultimate meaning . . . that is right, just, and loving" (p. 30). It does not shy away from the difficult but rather attends with courage and compassion to the brute realities of pain, suffering, and injustice in the world, and cultivates commitment to addressing them. Wholeheartedness acknowledges and contends with grief, outrage, and despair, but also cultivates habits of pragmatic hope, which in turn allow agency to develop (Shade, 2001). And wholeheartedness engages thoughtfully, deliberately, and in good faith with the available evidence, listening generously to those perspectives that contradict our own views.

The term "wholeheartedness" may resonate with readers familiar with Dewey's (1916/2008) three attitudes necessary for reflective thinking: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness.[4] My proposed use here expands upon Dewey's conception. For Dewey, wholeheartedness—or what he later termed "simple-mindedness" or "directness"—indicated a unity of

attention and purpose and the absence of distraction or half-hearted commitments. "Absorption, engrossment, full concern with subject matter for its own sake, nurture it," he wrote. "Divided interest and evasion destroy it" (p. 183). While my own approach to wholeheartedness does require fullness of intellectual commitment, I am more interested in the "heart" portion of the term than Dewey seems to have been. Wholeheartedness, as I use it, calls for *caring*, in two senses of the word. That is, wholeheartedness entails caring as compassionate interdependence, in the sense that we take care of one another (Hytten, 2015; Noddings, 2002); and it entails caring as unwavering commitment, in the sense that we care deeply about the outcomes of our efforts toward social transformation. When exercising caring, then, we reject classroom approaches that harm any persons whatsoever, as well as any approaches that pay lip service to social transformation while reproducing the status quo.

I want to acknowledge that each of these three proposed characteristics of a transformative criticality is challenging to implement. In a profession beset by ever-accumulating and often contradictory demands, a democratic citizenship education that engages diverse groups in a joint struggle for social transformation, supports young people in engaging in deliberation and collective action, and cultivates a wholehearted engagement with the uplifting and the difficult alike is an enormous undertaking. "We must remember why it is so difficult" to make moral commitments, Purpel (1999) has reminded us. "We must have compassion for each other and accept as part of our assumption that the matter of making such commitments is of great significance to each of us and that it is very likely that many of us have struggled mightily with this issue" (p. 58). Democratic citizenship educators interested in increasing our capacity to contribute to social transformation ought to hold ourselves accountable to this goal, but we need also to have compassion for ourselves on the path.

### *Teaching for Dissent:* An Exemplar of Transformative Criticality

Stitzlein's (2014) *Teaching for Dissent* favors neither exclusively the critical thinking approach (with its inattention to social inequality) nor the critical pedagogical approach (with its risk of political indoctrination). Rather, I argue that Stitzlein's book expresses all three characteristics of transformative criticality, drawing from the best of both critical thinking and critical pedagogy without taking sides. *Teaching for Dissent*, Stitzlein explains from the outset, is grounded in the idea that "good dissent is key to the maintenance and improvement of democracy," because dissent enables divergent voices to be heard and contributes to the legitimacy of the government. She calls attention to a recent upsurge in dissent in contemporary America, from the Occupy Movement to the Tea Party, representing polarization not as a problem but as evidence of dissent's potential to transform society. Thus, she suggests that we aim to "maximize this historic moment of dissent in our streets" (p. 3) in service of building a democracy "where competing visions of good living are exchanged" (p. 8). To contribute to this

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3   As Levinson (2014) explained, action civics engages students in examining their community, choosing a pressing issue, researching the issue and setting a goal, analyzing power dynamics in the situation, developing strategies for addressing the problem, and taking action to address policy (p. 68). Action civics has great potential to support young people in learning to translate voice into influence, and thus to contribute to transforming the social order.

4   Tracking the concept of wholeheartedness through Dewey's work presents a challenge, since he changed the label he applied to this concept between the 1910 edition of *How We Think* and a later discussion of reflective thinking in 1916's *Democracy and Education,* then dropped the concept completely from the 1933 edition of *How We Think.* In tracing this evolution, I am indebted to Rodgers (2002) for a useful bibliographic footnote (p. 865, n. 4).

transformative aim, she argues, schools should support young people in developing the skills and dispositions necessary for dissent.

*Teaching for Dissent* enacts a version of transformative criticality in that it endorses both critical thinking and critical pedagogical perspectives while sidestepping the pitfalls of both. That is, it attends in an engaged and elaborated way to the challenges of social inequality, while refraining from steering readers toward predetermined conclusions. Along the way, the volume expresses (to varying extents) the concept of "decentered unities" as a way of conceptualizing who is involved; a strategy both participatory and justice-oriented; and a disposition toward wholeheartedness. Thus, its approach to democratic citizenship education may contain greater potential to contribute to transforming the social order than do the critical thinkers' or critical pedagogues' approaches in isolation.

Of the three characteristics of a transformative criticality I have proposed, cultivating decentered unities is least developed in *Teaching for Dissent*. That said, the volume does express faith in diverse groups' potential to find common ground. Stitzlein's (2014) emphasis on "dissent within the process of consensus-building" (p. 12) resembles the pluralists' belief in difference as an asset to deliberation more than it resembles Apple's (2014) argument that "alliances when possible are crucial to strategies of interruption" (p. 94). On the other hand, a lengthy bipartisan appeal in the opening pages demonstrates sincere belief in the value of coalition building among unlikely allies. Arguing that "issues of dissent are central to both parties . . . within the larger picture of a successfully flourishing democracy" (p. 3), Stitzlein suggests that liberals and conservatives alike aim to interrupt the status quo: Despite aspirations to conserve the past, Stitzlein points out, the Right—like the Left—uses dissent to propose new alternatives. And both parties assert "deep commitments to individual liberties," albeit for different ends. To the extent that dissent "marries the best of both parties and is feasible in today's world" without specifying specific political or ideological aims (Stitzlein, 2014, p. 4), it offers an opportunity to build what Apple (2014) has called "a richer and more diverse 'we'" (p. 94).

*Teaching for Dissent* endorses both participatory and justice-oriented approaches to citizenship education. Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) "participatory citizenship," recall, emphasized training students to engage with government and community organizations and to "develop strategies for accomplishing collective tasks," while "justice-oriented citizenship" teaches young people to "question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time" (p. 240). Democratic citizenship educators interested in social transformation, they argued, must engage young people in both approaches. Stitzlein (2014) advocates such a model when she urges educators to provide opportunities for young people to "bring children out to politically and civically active groups," and to work "alongside real people engaged in struggle, doing what Giroux called 'making the political more pedagogical'" (p. 176). Insofar as it emphasizes "struggle," this approach is more than participatory, and insofar as it prioritizes engaging in authentic political

decision-making processes, it exceeds the characteristics of justice-oriented citizenship as Westheimer and Kahne described it. For Stitzlein, young people must learn both how to exercise voice in political institutions, and how to dissent against them when necessary.

Of the three characteristics of transformative criticality I have proposed, wholeheartedness is *Teaching for Dissent*'s clear strong suit. Wholeheartedness, I have suggested, entails ability to distinguish between situations that call for measured deliberation, and situations that call for impassioned response. In keeping with this approach, Stitzlein (2014) calls attention to the place in dissent for both "rational argument and rhetoric" and "emotions and embodied experience." Reasoned deliberation and the inclusion of multiple perspectives are essential to dissent, Stitzlein argues, endorsing the pluralist viewpoint that "we need to celebrate and legitimize conflict and disagreement not just as facts of life, but sources of better living" (p. 72). At the same time, "other techniques of dissent" are equally necessary. These may include the expression of powerful emotions such as frustration and anger, which have the capacity to "alert dissenters to problems" and "mobilize comrades and persuade opponents" (p. 61). These may also include the intemperate strategies of "mobilization, protest, and disruption" and may "require [the] remedial work" of securing access for oppressed peoples before deliberation can take place (pp. 73–74, quoting Levine & Nierras, 2007, p. 36).

As these strategies may suggest, wholeheartedness in democratic citizenship education does not avoid the difficult, but rather attends with courage and compassion to pain, suffering, and injustice and cultivates commitment to addressing them. In *Teaching for Dissent*, these qualities of wholeheartedness arise in Stitzlein's (2014) discussions of despair and of hope. In a rare move for democratic citizenship educators favoring either the critical thinking or critical pedagogical approach, Stitzlein argues that students "should discuss the impact of despair." They should turn toward and acknowledge their own and others' suffering "and brainstorm ways to persist through it . . . It is important that children recognize their own closeness to, participation in, or complicity with atrocity and despair in order to move from passive listener . . . to active agent," Stitzlein argues (p. 163). But she does not stop at the despair that sometimes characterizes critical pedagogical critique. Instead, she advocates cultivating hope among dissenters.

In her chapter on hope (coauthored with Nolan), Stitzlein (2014) argues that good dissenters must cultivate a disposition of hopefulness that "is located within and grows out of the muddle and complex circumstances of everyday life" (p. 150). This pragmatist conception of hope is not starry-eyed or unrealistic, but rather "resides in a world that is both horrendous and joyful" (p. 152). Amidst messy and often difficult realities, young dissenters learn neither to give up in despair nor to take refuge in fantasies and delusions. Instead, they learn to practice the clear-eyed posing of alternatives. Good dissent, then, marshals a "language of possibility," in which "hope becomes anticipatory rather than messianic, mobilizing rather than therapeutic'" (p. 148, quoting Giroux, 2006, p. 37). Such a wholehearted approach to democratic citizenship

calls for enormous courage and resourcefulness, from teachers and students alike. Stitzlein makes clear that teaching for dissent requires nothing less.

With its faith in dissent to engender decentered unities across partisan lines, its endorsement of a simultaneously participatory and justice-oriented democratic citizenship curriculum, and its wholehearted and pragmatic hopefulness, *Teaching for Dissent* offers democratic citizenship educators a useful model of what transformative criticality might look like. Stitzlein takes seriously both the critical pedagogues' call to social accountability and the critical thinkers' call to allow citizens to determine for themselves what a just and equitable society consists of. By so doing, she models an approach to criticality which offers democratic citizenship education an enlarged capacity to contribute to social transformation.

## Conclusion

Because of the two approaches' unwillingness to accept their own limitations, I have argued that neither critical pedagogy nor critical thinking is presently in a good position to contribute to democratic citizenship education's efforts to transform the social order. Rather than fortifying their positions, I suggest, each side would do well to listen generously to rivals' critiques. This does not mean that we ought to abandon our loyalties, however. At the outset of this article, I revealed my own critical pedagogical affinity, and despite its limitations, in my view, critical pedagogy's transformative possibilities outweigh its shortcomings. That said, I take seriously Burbules and Berk's (1999) charge that scholars of all stripes ought to attend and respond to the most difficult challenges to our points of view.

By suggesting the term *transformative criticality* and proposing some defining characteristics in the form of decentered unities, participatory and justice-oriented citizenship, and wholeheartedness, I gesture to a possible path out of the the impasse Burbules and Berk (1999) described. By so doing, I hope to avail critical pedagogical scholars like myself, and critical thinkers too, of a set of criteria for enlarging our work's transformative capacities.

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