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# Democracy & Education

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## Extending Our Understanding of Lived Experiences

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### Abstract

This response considers the strengths of Carr and Thésée's 2017 paper in *Democracy & Education* and explores further areas of research related to education for democracy or citizenship education.

### This article is in response to

Carr, P. R., & Thésée, G. (2017). Seeking democracy inside, and outside, of education: Reconceptualizing perceptions and experiences related to democracy and education. *Democracy & Education*, 25(2), Article 4. Retrieved from <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol25/iss2/4>

**T**HIS RESPONSE DISCUSSES the arguments and findings of Carr and Thésée's (2017) paper on education for democracy through and outside of school. In their paper, Carr and Thésée argued for the importance of acknowledging how informal experiences/education influence teacher candidates' views of educating for democracy (EfD). Recognizing the relevance and significance of the authors' main argument on informal education through a review of some of my research findings, I begin my response by discussing some areas where Carr and Thésée can continue to develop their concepts further, such as by developing a deeper and theoretical conception of informal education and education for democracy. I then discuss what I believe to be some of the shortcomings of their models, which may limit how they collect and analyze their data. I conclude my response by discussing their findings, using my points to illustrate how the authors can continue to work on and elaborate on their work. I consider further areas of research related to education for democracy or citizenship education. Carr and Thésée's paper addresses important research related to education for democracy or citizenship education. I consider how we can continue and expand the conversation while addressing possible limitations. Education for democracy or citizenship education is vital today in our world troubled by issues such as racism, inequality, and conflict.

### The Concept of Informal Education

Carr and Thésée (2017) argued for the importance of acknowledging how lived experience, or what they called informal education (IE), influences the attitudes of teacher candidates to education for democracy. In their research, they found that teacher candidates in different nations had little or simple conceptions of education for democracy, what they theorize to be "thin" conceptions of education for democracy in the sense that teacher candidates had little knowledge of civic processes and education, they tended to equate democracy with "traditional" activities such as voting, and they did not seem to have much critical awareness of social justice in society. In our research (Broom et al., 2016a) conducted with university youth in varied faculties in seven nations, we also found that lived experience was important in shaping attitudes and values to democracy.

Carr and Thésée (2017) made an important point in acknowledging how our lived experiences shape our attitudes. However,

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they can expand upon what they mean by lived experience or informal education, drawing from and developing their meanings from theory and literature. In our research, which we conducted in nations with diverse experiences with democracy (Canada, Mexico, India, Italy, Japan, Hong Kong, and England), for example, we developed a model of what we call internal and external factors, which influence youth's attitudes and actions, drawing from the work of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological systems theory and Overton's (2010) positive youth development theory. We argued for youth's civic attitudes and actions to develop from the interaction of their internal and external factors and conditions in a living, dynamic form. We theorized internal factors to be those that have been acquired and internalized over time, such as knowledge, attitudes, and skills. We considered external influences to encompass factors that influence youth's attitudes and actions, such as family, friends, schools, communities, and general social and economic contexts. By expanding upon and studying these factors in a disaggregated manner, we can expand upon our knowledge of the way in which youth's varied lived experiences may influence their current attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs. For example, we found that youth's families were a significant factor (statistically significant) in influencing youth's civic knowledge, attitudes, and actions. It is not surprising when we consider the long and deep influence of parents on their children. Another factor that we found to be significant was general social and cultural contexts. That is, youth "read" their contexts and make decisions about how to participate or act based on their reading of these contexts. In some nations, youth make conscious decisions not to participate in civic processes due to issues such as political corruption, fraud, or voter intimidation. Youth find other ways of participating in their societies. Thus, we applaud Carr and Thésée (2017) for identifying and researching the significance of lived experience, but we would like to encourage them and other scholars in the field to expand upon how lived experience is understood and theorized and the multiple elements that may encompass and influence it.

### Conceptual Models

Carr and Thésée (2017) grounded their research in a conceptual model of thin-or-thick democracy. This model is helpful in exploring "simple" or more conceptually complex ways of thinking about democracy in teacher candidates. However, as only a two-sided/either-or model, it can be limiting in the sense that individuals may hold elements of both sides simultaneously, as well as further conceptions and attitudes not identified in the model. Thus, the model may limit the study's findings. It is also possible to argue that their model is one grounded in critical theory ideology, which draws from Freire (1973) and Giroux's (2011) work, as the authors connected "thick" conceptions of democracy to critical theory concepts. Thus, the model itself is ideologically situated. Carr and Thésée's model can be deepened and expanded through a more thorough exploration and grounding of their work in models and theories of citizenship education. For example, Marshall's (1950) seminal work identified three models of citizenship: political citizenship, social citizenship, and civic citizenship. Since

Marshall's work, theorists have developed thoughtful conceptual models of what citizenship is, including Westheimer and Kahne (2004)'s model of different kinds of citizenship behavior and Heater's (2004) conceptual cube of citizenship. Developing a model of thinking about democracy that draws upon multiple conceptual models and thinking in the field could lead to richer research findings. Indeed, one of the authors' findings was that teacher candidates did not seem to hold "thick" conceptions of citizenship or that teacher candidates felt uncomfortable with some components of "thicker" views of democracy. Since it is an ideological position grounded in one particular theory (critical theory), it is not surprising that teacher candidates may hold some reservations about critical theory concepts. In a study I conducted with teachers, curriculum developers, and community members about a new course on social justice in British Columbia (Social Justice 12), I (Broom, 2013) found that multiple conceptions on the new subject existed. Some research participants expressed concerns about how the course could become an ideological platform for the "pushing of particular views on youth" rather than a course in which youth were introduced to multiple ways of thinking about various complex social issues and allowed to explore these using critical thinking and inquiry processes. The course's focus on exploring complex social issues, some participants stated, could be co-opted by those with strong ideological positions who used the course to push these views on others rather than to explore multiple views on subjects. Thus, teacher candidates might be right hold some reservations about what "thick" democracy is understood to mean. By developing a more complex theoretical model of what democracy is, which includes openness to diverse theoretical conceptions and thinking about democracy, the researchers may have found their findings to be more complex as well.

In our research, we (Broom et al., 2016a) found that while youth value democracy in Marshall's sense of political or social engagement, youth's actions depended on reading their contexts. Thus, youth may express views that they don't act on. Carr and Thésée's (2017) work would benefit from exploring these layers of attitudes and actions further.

Our findings dovetail with Carr and Thésée's (2017) in that we both illustrate the need for formal education to acknowledge the significance of lived experience and informal education on students' attitudes; however, this argument is actually not a new one. In fact, as the authors acknowledged, both Dewey and Freire explored the connections between lived experience/informal education and formal education. Dewey's whole argument, as I see it, focused on critiquing formal schooling as apart from life, and not "a part" of life, as he theorized it should be. He argued that schooling "is life" and that educators should thus focus on education as experience, or experience as education. Thus, the significance of lived experience or informal education has been long recognized.

Carr and Thésée (2017) made a good point in bringing this factor to our attention. They reminded us that we should recognize that teacher candidates come into our programs with attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices acquired and shaped through a

lifetime of lived experiences in both formal and informal settings. Questions that are at the crux of this understanding include: how do teachers in general and teacher educators in particular connect to the lived experiences and current beliefs and practices of their teacher candidates? Have these candidates honestly acknowledged and reflected on their beliefs and practices, and—perhaps—even changed their thinking and attitudes, while honoring the diversity of who we are and how we have been shaped? Further, and even more challenging, how do we (or should we? or can we?) change practices, as attitudes and practices don't necessarily align? Carr and Thésée didn't offer any new solutions about *how* we can educate our teacher candidates, but they did remind us of the importance of lived experience or informal education. As well, they made us think about the questions of what exactly education for citizenship/democracy is and why we do it. The latter is clearly a complex and contested concept ranging from voting in political elections to being a “good or nice” neighbor to pushing for the complete overhaul of our society. The methods we are left to consider go back to Dewey and Freire: reflection and discussion (Dewey, 1916) and *conscientização* (Freire, 1973). A question I am left wondering is why have these techniques repeatedly been suggested for over 100 years? How possible is it for teacher educators, during a year or a course, to influence teacher candidates' attitudes and beliefs, in comparison with 20-plus years of lived (formal and informal) experience? It seems that the questions left to research are: Is it possible to deeply change the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of young adults in a course or a program? How do we do this? Should we do this? How do we prevent pushing one perspective as truth? Do individuals slowly go back to lifelong developed attitudes and experiences?

### **What Is Lived Experience or Informal Education?**

Another area to further tease out is exactly what is included in the concept of “lived experience” or “informal education.” This concept is underdeveloped in Carr and Thésée's (2017) work. In our research, as mentioned previously, we found factors such as family to be significant elements in shaping youth's attitude and actions. This is not surprising when we consider that we are born into families and that we spend some of our most formative moments and probably the most time (when we are young) with our families or caregivers. This raises a question that goes to the heart of the relatively young (just over 150 years) public school project: Who is primarily responsible for the education of youth: public experts and the state or parents? Until around 200 years ago, parents were responsible for their children's education, and they generally taught their children through apprenticeships and informal lived experience: Children worked alongside their parents in farms and other small enterprises (Broom, 2012, 2016). Any formal education was limited to perhaps part-time Sunday or church education, where children may have learned how to read and write and their catechism. With the gradual move to public schools, controlled by governments and housed with “professional” (trained) teachers, authority for the education of children seems to have passed to the state in the interests of the state and arguably all citizens; hence, the public mission of schools has been that of “making good

citizens” (for insightful histories of public schooling, see Tyack, 1974, and Doheny, 1991). This assertion of public or government control was a process (Broom, 2016b; Doheny, 1991; Tyack, 1974), but cases still emerge where discussion ensues over who should have the final say in developing youth's attitudes and beliefs. In research conducted on the course Social Justice 12 course, described before (Broom, 2013), for example, some parents disagreed with the content being taught to their children. Who has the final authority over what is taught to youth: parents, teachers, or the state? What is the danger or possibility of indoctrination? Arguably, we all are situated in ideological or philosophical positions. Is there a way to teach critical thinking or consciousness in a way that does not become doctrinaire? How can we allow for fluidity and openness while acknowledging that active citizenship may encompass diverse elements? In our research (Broom et al., 2016a), for example, we found that in some nations youth may choose not to be politically active, as their contexts are subject to political corruption and voter intimidation strategies. Youth may choose to be active in other ways. Similarly, in other contexts, where youth have come across lack of influence through traditional political channels, youth may try new forms of political protest using social media. In Italy, these new forms of social protest have had some influence on formal politics. Democracy, politics, and engagement are complex and contested. As educators ourselves, we can take Carr and Thésée's work to heart and reflect on how our own beliefs and actions have been formed through our lived experiences, both formal and informal, and acknowledge that we are ourselves situated.

Of all Carr and Thésée's (2017) models, the most problematic for me is their scale of what the authors argued is increasing critical consciousness in youth. At the bottom of their scale, they placed hostility and rejection, and then they moved through the actions of indifference to that of openness, engagement, and *conscientização* (Freire, 1973). This model draws from Freire's work in concluding with critical consciousness. The model is problematic as it is possible that youth or teachers may choose to live or express their critical consciousness or action in multiple ways. Having only one “ladder” approach that all are supposed to follow seems somewhat limiting. As Carr and Thésée acknowledged how informal education and lived experience shape who we are, it seems to me that we should also acknowledge and honor that we may end up expressing very different behaviors or actions based on these differences. As I mentioned previously, in our findings, youth may choose not to act, as that may be the smart decision in particular contexts. Not acting may be the best option available, or acting through different means may be the best option—but these means may not be identified on Carr and Thésée's ladder of actions. If we honor the diverse lived experiences and informal education we have had, should we not open ourselves to diverse ways of engaging in society, as well as diverse articulations of what it means to engage thoughtfully in our society? However, by stating this, I am not saying that anything goes. I am arguing for understanding diverse positions that honors our lived experience in a manner that is thoughtful.

## Carr and Thésée's Findings

For their first finding, Carr and Thésée (2017) stated that youth may have “thin views” of democracy as a result of a lack of critical education. Their point here focused on the lack of formal education that teacher candidates may have received, which, the authors argued, has not been adequate to influence the kinds of informal educational experiences these teacher candidates experienced in relation to their views of democracy. In our research (Broom et al., 2016a), a large number of youth stated that they had not received citizenship education, when it was mandated in all the nations we studied, or that their education had been insufficient or inadequate. Thus, our research supported that of Carr and Thésée's in stating that youth's formal education of citizenship education/education for democracy may be inadequate. Further research studying how practicing teachers conceptualize and teach citizenship/democracy is necessary to explore what and how teachers are teaching their concepts in their classes. It may be the case that formal education on education for democracy/citizenship education is generally inadequate but we need further research to back this assertion up. We also need to see how this formal citizenship education interacts with the informal experience and education of teacher candidates, which is the main argument of the authors. We need to recognize that formal education is part of youth's lived experience but that it is not the same as informal experiences. We need further research clarifying these various influences and their significance on youth.

The authors' second conclusion was that teacher candidates appeared to express some interest in social justice concepts but also some reservations and some lack of clarity about the term. This is not surprising when we consider their first conclusion that youth's education about democracy, and by extension the term social justice, was inadequate. Once again, we need further clarity about exactly how social justice is understood (a complex term) and how teachers are educating for it. We need further research on the demographics and backgrounds of teacher educators. Teacher candidates' lack of knowledge about social justice may not be surprising, if it is true that they are mostly White and from comfortable middle-class backgrounds in which their schooling is mostly about learning facts and demonstrating that learning to their teachers in “good” schools. We need to clarify exactly what the influences of formal schooling and informal lived experiences are. In this case, it appears that both formal school experiences and informal lived experiences (informal education) reinforce themselves. A question that remains is how do we address this finding? Do we need a more critical formal education? How does this education dovetail with our lived experiences, honor who we are as a function of what we have lived and experienced, and teach an open and critical conception of social justice?

The authors' third finding was that the students' formal education related to education for democracy has been inadequate. This point about formal education, however, isn't the authors' main argument about the need to acknowledge how the informal and lived experience of teacher candidates affect their views. The authors need to be clear on both these diverse influences and address both in their research and findings. The

authors focused their research findings discussion on formal educational experience rather than lived experience. Explaining both and how these relate together would enrich their work.

For their fourth conclusion, the authors argued that teacher candidates expressed some uncertainty about how to educate for democracy and some concerns about engaging their students in critical discussion on political issues. Carr and Thésée (2017) argued that those teacher candidates who have had more critical life experiences expressed more likelihood of engaging their students in discussions on or about critical issues. While the point is a salient one in relation to their argument about the need to consider how lived experiences shape who we are, this point can be elaborated on and clarified with reference to how the research data was collected. How did they make the connection between teacher candidates' answers and their lived experience? Is there any research data they can share or any comments from the teacher candidates? How strong was the connection? Was it statistically significant? How many teacher candidates made this assertion? As this is such an important point in relation to their argument, more data and more discussion would be helpful. Further, how do we know that teacher candidates will actually do what they say they will do in their practice? If the authors conduct further research by watching these teacher candidates teach, we will have further understanding of this point. The authors also do not consider what the implications of this finding are for those teacher candidates who have not had such critical lived experiences. By extension of their arguments, we can assume that teacher candidates who have come from less challenging backgrounds may be less critical educators. Further research can explore whether this is indeed the case and clarify the relations between formal educational experiences, informal educational experiences and general lived experience. Do students from particular backgrounds, for example, have different formal educational experiences? Further discussion can also consider the implications of such assertions, as well as what it means to describe life experiences as “critical” ones. In addition, are we meant to expose teacher candidates to critical life experiences in our teacher education programs if this is the case? What exactly do these life experiences need to look like in order to be effective? More discussion about the findings themselves as well as the implications of the findings for teacher educators would strengthen the paper.

Finally, for their fifth conclusion, the authors stated that teacher candidates were aware of the influence of neoliberal policies in schools, even if they didn't necessarily articulate the term. They stated that, as a result, teacher candidates may not see schools as necessarily the best places to teach education for democracy. The authors also stated that teacher candidates who have had challenging or critical lived experiences may be more likely to leave education programs as a result of these neoliberal structures. Recognizing that teacher candidates have spent most of their lives in schools and have experienced these structures as students through means such as testing and access to privileged postsecondary schooling as a result of grades, we can argue that these experiences form part of both teacher candidates' formal and

lived experiences. The influences of these factors will—by extension—depend upon the specific schools and contexts that teacher candidates have come from. Thus, lived experience is in part also formal school experience. Because they are “successful” students in the sense that they have graduated from school and accessed postsecondary education, it is also possible that many teacher candidates are also those who are “good at doing school,” in that they know how to behave in classes (be respectful, listen, and learn; memorize facts for tests; give teachers the “correct” answers). This returns us to the need for further research to explore if teachers do indeed tend to reward those students who “act as good students” rather than those who may be more critical in their classes. It also opens us up to consider how we can educate our students thoughtfully and respectfully and to consider further what it means to be a “good” student. For example, students from different cultural backgrounds may have different ways of engaging in classroom contexts that North American teachers may not recognize or validate. As Rogoff discussed in her award-winning book *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* (2003), educational structures and processes—and by extension students’ classroom behaviors—can differ markedly in varied cultural settings.

## Conclusion

The value of Carr and Thésée’s (2017) work is that they turned our attention to considering the importance of informal education and lived experience in shaping our teacher candidates, indeed, all our students’ knowledge, attitudes, and values. Lived experiences and informal educational experiences can’t be separated from who our teacher candidates/students are and how they may think about and practice teaching. Dewey (1916) and Freire (1973) both recognized that our students come to us shaped and formed through their lives. Carr and Thésée’s work leaves us with a number of questions to further research and consider: How do we understand the connections between lived experience and formal and informal educational processes, for lived experience encompasses both? If lived experience is so crucial, should we fuse formal educational experience to critical informal experience and reflection? Further, how do we teach our teacher candidates without becoming doctrinaire ourselves and in a manner that is effective in fostering reflection, while honoring how our students are shaped by the “accidental” lived, formal, and informal educational experiences they may have known? Carr and Thésée didn’t address these questions, so we are left with the works of Dewey (1916) and Freire (1973): We can help our students reflect on their lived experiences (both informal and formal educational and lived experiences) and consider how they have been shaped through these experiences and influenced by external factors such as their contexts, families, and cultures.

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