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# Democracy & Education

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## Democratic Teaching and Learning for Social Action

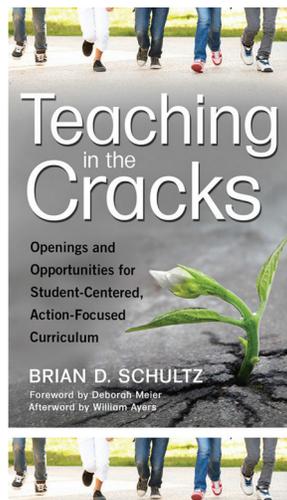
### A Review of *Teaching in the Cracks: Openings and Opportunities for Student-Centered, Action-Focused Curriculum*

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**I**N HIS 2018 book, *Teaching in the Cracks: Openings and Opportunities for Student-Centered, Action-Focused Curriculum*, Brian Schultz both builds upon and offers a new focus for engaging students in authentic learning in an age of high-stakes testing and prescribed curricula. The purpose of this work is to help teachers find ways to teach “through democratic, justice-oriented, emergent, and progressive” practices (Schultz, 2018, p. 5) that “honor children and teaches them to be active, politically engaged, justice oriented citizens” (Schultz, 2018, p. 5). The book provides rich examples of student-designed projects that are centered in local, urban, community problems and needs, requiring students to become authentically engaged in their community. Social-action projects elevate the concept of project-based learning to a more meaningful level as students learn in a democratic environment in the classroom and practice democratic principles in their community.

These ideas are not entirely new. Schultz’s (2018) philosophy of student-led learning is firmly anchored in the work of progressive educators John Dewey and Paulo Freire. From Dewey: “There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process.” (Dewey, 1963, p. 67). In his book, Schultz reminds us of the historic democratic ideals of public education and their critical role in building a sense of community through integrative, emergent curricula with student leadership at its center. Schultz urges teachers to create classrooms where



students can take a stance on school and community problems, engaging them in “an education of ‘I wonder’ instead of ‘I do’” (Freire, 1973, p. 39).

Reflecting on past decades of efforts to engage students through a project-based learning, *Teaching in the Cracks* offers a clear contrast to the practice of student choice and voice in selection of projects. Schultz (2018) makes a compelling case for students to learn while immersed in an incubator for democracy, particularly through social-action projects. He maintains that the only way to develop productive citizens is to abandon current school models built upon obedience and compliance. Examples from one school’s social-action curriculum projects include the journey of a teacher through the process of teaching students that they have the power to make a difference. Schultz selected teachers whom he had mentored and who were comfortable sharing their struggles and triumphs while creating classrooms focused on solving important community problems. These classrooms moved well beyond the practice of individual student-selected interest projects to tackling, as a group, compelling community social justice issues. The learning within student-led, democratic classrooms offers a forum for teachers and students to partner in the process and demonstrate equal dignity and respect for each student.

Considering the traditional organization of American high schools, Schultz’s (2018) proposed model of student-led social-action projects offers a refreshing shift to an inclusive classroom where each voice is valued, and thus makes the point that every

individual is equally valued and needed in a democratic society. How does this model play out in a traditional setting? Schultz's excellent high school example is drawn from an alternative high school designed to partner with communities. Most students in this country attend traditional public schools. How may they be better designed to include all students in social justice work and to understand their role in a democracy? Perhaps a sequel to Schultz's work could focus on schools that are designed for democracy and equity and that celebrate the strengths of every student. Schools that track and sort student by perceived ability create an additional layer of challenge to convincing students that every voice is equally valued and respected in the community.

It's important to discuss the differences in Schultz's vision of community-based social-action curricula from a focus on personalization or individualized learning, ideas which have been promoted both as a means of allowing for student choice but also for recognizing individual differences. For example, at The Met, a small charter high school in Providence, Rhode Island, students are required to individually engage in authentic projects and present their work in exhibitions that "demonstrate skills and personal qualities that matter in the world outside of school" (Levine, 2002, p. 107). The focus on authentic, individual personalized learning contrasts with examples of authentic, community-based problem-solving achieved through a collaborative group experience, setting Schultz's work apart from others. The models in the text begin with the group's journey to find and solve an important problem in their community.

Why is this difference so important for us to understand? *Teaching in the Cracks* encourages educators to embed democratic practices in the daily lives of students, which includes becoming a valued member of a group, engaging in deep problem-solving with peers, and understanding where one's individual talents and interests can be of value in solving authentic problems in the community. These practices do not detract from personalization or individual passions. Rather, they offer a pathway to understanding how these individual talents may serve the larger community, understanding how one student can make a difference within the context of the group. Students who practice finding their voice will be better positioned to address the various power structures of their schools and communities. Navigating the complexities of this approach requires skillful teacher leadership so that students may realize the full potential of community involvement and activism.

Though Schultz's (2018) examples live in more urban settings, there are lessons here for rural schools too. Rural areas pose unique problems and opportunities for civic action and social justice

projects. While lacking networks of service organizations, rural communities rely on the strength of individuals and families. Students often travel away from their local community to a consolidated school or regional middle and high schools. When students leave their towns to attend school and when teachers commute to these schools from away, it becomes challenging for teachers to engage students in local issues. When there is early displacement of students, together with accompanying loss of parent participation, curricula embedded in the community takes on a new urgency. Students lose their sense of place early on when they attend a regional school. Engaging students in social action early on may contribute to students valuing their rural place in new ways and deter outmigration to more urban settings. Looking at Schultz's curriculum focus from a rural viewpoint could be an interesting journey for his education students.

Tomlinson and McTighe (2006), in their seminal work, *Integrating Differentiated Instruction + Understanding by Design*., offered their view of teaching responsively: "When students feel affirmation, affiliation, a sense of contribution, growing autonomy, accomplishment, and shared responsibility for the welfare of the group, the climate for learning good" (p. 18). Perhaps Schultz (2018) would add that, in this climate, the opportunity for social change is also good.

*Teaching in the Cracks* was written for teachers. Teachers need support to take on bold new strategies within the traditional structure of schools, to face doubting administrators, and to wrangle with the hierarchy within a department. Schultz's (2018) work uncovers the challenges of teaching in this environment while also learning the requisite skills needed to take students on an amazing journey of authentic community engagement and problem-solving. Schultz urges teachers to take small steps, to find an opening to take the plunge, and to empower their students to find their voice.

## References

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