
Democracy & Education

The Struggle for Strong Democracy: We Need to Go Deeper.

A Response to *Democratic Spaces: How Teachers Establish and Sustain Democracy and Education in Their Classrooms*

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Abstract

The article by Collins, Hess, and Lowery (2019) explores struggles teachers faced in order to pursue Deweyan educational practices. This response proposes that even more is needed for a critical educational practice, called “strong democracy.” Such an approach requires addressing and countering the White supremacist legacy of U.S. capitalism and U.S. education. The article advances examples and various projects in strong democratic education.

This article is in response to

Collins, J., Hess, M. E., Lowery, C. L. (2019). Democratic Spaces: How Teachers Establish and Sustain Democracy and Education in Their Classrooms. *Democracy and Education*, 27(1), Article 3. Available at: <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol27/iss1/3>

AS AN EVALUATOR for student teachers, I sit in the back of a San Francisco classroom for students with IEP (Individualized Education Program) designation, in this case students with behavioral and anger-management issues. In this classroom, tasks are defined by a workbook; behavior is policed closely. I can't help feeling how the multiyear sentence of childhood is sad and boring, especially for those who do not fit in the standard model of attentive and “good” student. Despite the beautiful visions many of us hold about engaging curriculum and student-centered pedagogy, in most cases, the life of school is authoritarian. That's in the DNA of Western education. The paradigm of what we call teaching is a transitive verb—I am transferring something from me to you.

In this context, we must admit that the main focus in the complex life of most classrooms is “management”—how do I keep these little sparks of meaning-making curiosity sitting still and doing what I want? The most popular approach to classroom management is simple behaviorism—punishments and rewards. The typical advice manual is, for instance, Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion* (2010), which is all about getting students to do what the adult, usually a white, middle-class adult, wants. This approach

never questions the knowledge claims, the cultural elitism, of the material being taught. Even programs designed to improve “Black achievement” tend to focus on increasing time on task, never questioning the task.

But real democratic teaching, teaching based on community-building, is not just a new way to manipulate students to accept elite world views but instead to change the direction, and the goal, of education. In this regard, the article “Democratic Spaces: How Teachers Establish and Sustain Democracy and Education in Their Classrooms,” by Julia Collins, Michael Hess, and Charles Lowery (2019), is a welcome intervention. Their investigation maps the ways that nine thoughtful teachers sought to implement

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democratic teaching in Ohio and the considerable obstacles they encountered.

The authors (2019) make an important contribution by exploring how teachers sought to implement what they call democratic education through six themes: fostering relationships, empowering students, teaching and using democratic skills, democratic educative structure, democratic teacher praxis, and obstacles.

The obstacles arose from the default policy environment of “standards, top down mandates, standardized testing,” in other words, authoritarian education. Democratic approaches to education are too often undermined by systems of supposed accountability. But we must ask: accountable to whom? I’ll come back to this question and attempt to answer it later.

I appreciate the way this study was anchored in John Dewey and made at least passing reference to Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, Herb Kohl, and Miles Horton. The questions it raised for me are not a critique of what these researchers found. Instead, they are a response to the deeper democratic imperatives of our time. In the first place, democracy such as we have in the U.S. is under attack. Fascism is on the rise. Indeed, the Highlander Center in Tennessee, site of education work by Horton and Freire, was recently burned by White nationalists. But these times also demand that we take a hard look at what we claim as democracy.

With so many people of color in prison in the U.S. in an unprecedented mass incarceration (more Black men in prison today than were held enslaved in 1860), with the 13th Amendment transferring the right to enslavement to the government, what kind of democracy are we talking about? With our schools feeding the school-to-prison pipeline, schools indeed looking more and more like prisons, how do we understand democracy?

We must ask whether the very notion of liberal democracy and the approach advocated by Dewey (1910) is adequate to address the pressing problems of education today. Dewey is, after all, the driving force behind progressive education as a way to a better, more democratic society. But we can’t simply pass over the truth that most democracies, from Athens to the founding of the U.S., have been reserved for privileged populations who sat on the backs of oppressed, often enslaved, workforces.

Dewey himself advanced visions of beautiful schooling but mainly for White people and safely within the founding myths of the U.S. His most popular work, *Democracy and Education* (1910), spends a considerable amount of time talking about “savage tribes” and contrasting “civilization and savagery.” During the same time that he was writing, a horrifying campaign of lynching was unleashed against Black people in this country, but he paid little attention to that. Also at the same time, W. E. B. DuBois (1935) was making a stinging critique of White racism in education and rewriting the history of public schooling in the brief period of Black Power in the Reconstruction South, but Dewey stayed out of that debate. The list of fundamental critiques, critiques from the margins, of educational practices in the U.S. goes on and on, from Carter G. Woodson to Septima Clark and Ella Baker. Too often, progressive education has stayed within the white lines of its own

lane even as those suffering colonial oppression have forged new liberatory educational initiatives.

Modern-day Deweyans, such as you might find at Stanford’s Learning Policy Institute, generally argue that good teaching will slowly wear away the deleterious effects of racism. Such an approach, while often generative and open-ended, ends up framing learning and teaching in a technicist way. This is the dominating theoretical assumption that drives the gatekeepers of teacher credentialing, from the qualifying exams to the Teacher Performance Assessment—most of them, incidentally, operated for profit by the Pearson corporation. In this approach, White supremacy and racism are only mildly considered, and they are viewed as a part of society’s imperfect superstructure, not as a defining element of the social hard drive. Genocide of Native Americans and enslavement and murder of millions of Africans are the foundation of U.S. wealth and power, demanding that we challenge the legitimacy of even the institutions of higher learning, as seen, for instance, in the case of Georgetown University creating a reparations fund (Hassan, 2019).

An example of shallow democratic education is classes on civics, which presume to teach citizenship. But such a curriculum contains a contradiction because it presupposes that credentialed authorities know best how to bestow civic knowledge on those who have been denied citizenship for generations. As Black civil rights educator Clark made clear, learning about citizenship needs to be an active process with students and communities themselves, as knowledge comes from the bottom. The learning process must be a dialectical engagement of theory and practice, an active process of demanding rights—not simply ingesting citizenship but constructing it through social practice resting on a strong knowledge base.

The anticolonial struggle for democratic education, what I would call “strong democracy,” can be found in the fight for deepening democratic rights in the 1950s through 1970s—what is called today the civil rights movement and the liberation struggles that grew out of it. One of the striking examples is the founding of Freedom Schools in Mississippi. Around the same time as Freire was publishing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* about critical education in Brazil, activists Cobb and Baker advanced the Freedom School project for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

In the short proposal that Cobb wrote (1963), he explained that, while the Black children in the South were denied many things—decent school facilities, honest and forward-looking curriculum, fully qualified teachers—the fundamental injury was “a complete absence of academic freedom and students are forced to live in an environment that is geared to squashing intellectual curiosity and different thinking.” He described the classrooms of Mississippi as “intellectual wastelands” and he challenged himself and others “to fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippi, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands and questions.” The proposal continued:

The aim of the Freedom School curriculum will be to challenge the student’s curiosity about the world, introduce him to his particularly “Negro” cultural background, and teach him basic literacy skills in one

integrated program. That is, the students will study problem areas in their world, such as the administration of justice, or the relation between state and federal authority. Each problem area will be built around a specific episode which is close to the experience of the students.

Building on student experience and student insight, Cobb, Freire, and others approached education as community-organizing and community empowerment, not simply the linear transmission of static knowledge from above.

The Mississippi model was only one example of strong democratic education initiatives. Throughout this period, we may recall a few highlights of education transformation, from the ethnic studies battle at San Francisco State to the Black Panthers' Oakland Community School. But, as Rickford (2016) has pointed out, the movement was operating on multiple levels and throughout the U.S. These included the struggle for community control of schools in New York in 1968 to the development of Afrocentric schools such as Uhuru Sasa school in Brooklyn and the Malcolm X Liberation University in Durham, North Carolina.

Such educational struggles for strong democracy continue today. Cobb, in his reflection on this work in *Monthly Review* (2011) argued that liberating education such as the model freedom schools, grew out of the civil rights struggles. But, he said, public schools today “seem to be doing little more than creating 21st century sharecroppers who are illiterate and unprepared for the demands of this new century” (p. 111). Of the struggles of the 1960s, he added, “the very people who had been written off as pathetic and too primitive and backward for citizenship found their voice and refuted with words and action all the assumptions about what they were satisfied with and wanted” (p. 113).

Strong democratic education demands that children be encouraged to celebrate their identities and their culture, to connect their intellectual and embodied work to their own communities. The assets of communities, including elders and those who have been marginalized, must be recognized and mobilized in the projects of education. Students need to see their communities' historic academic achievements in order to be empowered to imagine and create a world that has a place for them to thrive. As Muse (2019) articulated at the Black Graduation at UC Berkeley recently:

While some of you are classified as the first generation in the US, your ancestors came from academic traditions that date back eight centuries where scholars taught and studied mathematics, medicine, surgery, physics, philosophy, linguistics and art. During the 14th century, the University of Timbuktu in Mali had close to 25,000 students. They were taught from manuscripts written in Arabic, Bambara, and Songhai by scholars including Ahmad Baba al Massufi.

Our trajectory of liberation must go through DuBois to Woodson, to work like the Algebra project of education activists like Bob Moses and Jay Gillen. We must listen to our educational prophets

like Charles Payne, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006), Carol Lee (2007), Patrick Camangian (2015), and Bettina Love (2019). And social justice education, strong democratic education for White people, requires us to be explicit about the roots of U.S. wealth and privilege, about the construction of Whiteness under capitalism. The work of people like Robin DiAngelo (2018) and Chris Emdin (2017) must guide our pedagogy.

When we seek to pursue a pedagogy of deep democracy, we must ask: Is it necessary to go outside of our schools for liberation? We certainly know that schools in the U.S. are set up to reproduce racial, class, and gender inequities—all the time pretending to be a color-blind meritocracy. Can we really do liberatory work within an institution that is so thoroughly racist? I don't know the answer to that. I only know that schools are nowhere near static, and issues of pedagogy and curriculum are never settled. The classroom is one of the great sites of contention, where we fight out, every day, what kind of society we want to live in and how we will construct that society.

And here I return to the question of accountability. While the teachers in the Collins, Hess, and Lowery (2019) study were just the kinds of teachers seeking to disrupt the reproductive nature of school hierarchies, they encountered barriers to liberal democratic work from accountability mandates that came from above. But the issue is not simply accountability. Or rather, we don't want to throw out any idea of accountability, to have each classroom wander anywhere. For schools to pursue strong democracy, they indeed must be accountable but to community needs, to student concerns, to social equity. Schools need a revolution from below.

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