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# Democracy & Education

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## Dialectic of Empathy.

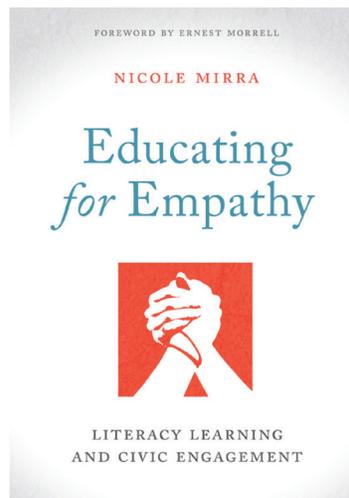
A Book Review of *Educating for Empathy: Literacy Learning and Civic Engagement*

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**W**HAT THE GOALS of American K–12 education are, and what they should be, is a topic perpetually contested. Parents, teachers, administrators, and politicians may claim education as existing to instill moral and ethical character, to prepare students for the job market, to help students achieve some version of general academic excellence (usually posited as preparation for the next grade level or for college), or to prepare young people to become thoughtful and responsible participants in American democracy. In *Educating for Empathy*, Mirra (2018) argues the merits of focusing language arts education on this last category by teaching citizenship via what she calls “critical civic empathy,” an active, change-focused form of empathy intent on bringing about greater social justice in contemporary society.

Mirra (2018) makes clear early on that the version of empathy she is interested in is distinct from, and in some ways opposed to, contemporary curricula that employs what is often referred to as “social-emotional learning” (SEL), in which students are taught the value of being kind, honest, and patient. Mirra’s concern with SEL stems from how it centers students’ individual feelings or reactions without focusing on the need for social change, a criticism she states mostly succinctly in the book’s conclusion when she notes that “if the empathy that we develop does not influence our behavior at the ballot box or on the streets of our communities, then the disposition actually does not mean much at all” (p. 103). Her concerns about curricula that merely encourage kindness echoes concerns others have made about demands for “civility” in



our society’s wider political discussions: In action, civility as a primary value ends up aligned with the desire to mute difficult or intense discussions and to therefore sidestep acknowledging who profits from current inequities and what changes need to be made to create a more just society. Social-emotional learning, like a very civil discussion of political difference, might allow everyone involved to demonstrate how polite they can be, but perhaps little more.

Mirra (2018) defines a critical civic empathy curriculum as a more rigorous process oriented not just toward the mere recognition of difference but also toward taking active steps to question how imbalances of power and privilege arise and what assumptions should be questioned in order to address those imbalances. Citing Frankfurt School theorists Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) as philosophical inspiration, Mirra suggests that the literacy classroom can be a site particularly suited to critical investigation and the questioning of social norms. While structuring lessons according to this critical version of empathy requires more planning, the focus pays dividends, because

*while it is a much more complicated proposition than simply telling students to be nice or to imagine how someone else feels, engaging in critical civic empathy is possible and, when taken seriously, allows for*

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*the kind of connections that are needed to break through the forces of divisiveness and polarization that structure our civic life.* (p. 8)

The goal of this kind of literacy is not a New Critical close-reading that reveals layers or matrices of meaning embedded in a piece of literature but instead an approach that sees texts as offering insights and potential paths toward changes students could make in civic life or in how they participate in society.

Mirra's (2018) first chapter details her study of two high school English teachers in South and East Los Angeles. She recounts the use, in a 10th-grade language arts class, of the term "warrior-scholar," noting that the teacher "explained that she developed this concept as a way to communicate to students her commitment to a vision of literacy linked to self- and social empowerment" (p. 24). In accord with this goal, the teacher recounted how units in the course are structured around local social issues relevant to the students' lives and that texts are chosen to provide specific narrative examples of those issues. Students are encouraged to make personal connections to the issues raised in the literature and then to engage in more wide-ranging discussions of the factors at play in the social issues. Through the use of focused exercises and carefully structured discussions, the teacher strived to move students to a deeper analysis of how these social issues have arisen and why they play a prominent role in contemporary civic life. As opposed to a use of literature in which all students read an exalted novel and then discuss the various issues they feel the text contends with, Mirra stresses the need for teachers to know and center the civic issues or skills they want students to learn and then to plan their lessons and use of literature around the civic issue rather than around a central text.

The book's second chapter concerns Mirra's (2018) experience as a high school debate coach and how the debate requirement to consider and address multiple perspectives on social issues offers a particularly acute context for the teaching of critical civic empathy. Though she does not discuss the value of classical rhetorical study directly, Mirra finds the rhetorical skills debate sharpens in students compelling, noting that

*through the careful teaching of their coaches about how strong arguments are constructed and how to assess the validity and rigor of every claim's intellectual foundations, debaters become more sophisticated about recognizing bias and questioning faulty assumptions—both their own and those of others.* (p. 41)

Fostering spirited debates about social issues may be something some teachers shy away from—especially teachers who are particularly careful not to espouse any particular political positions in class—but Mirra stresses that every choice teachers make, from the topic of a unit to the texts required, already has political implications and points out that as long as the teacher or debate coach is not partisan about any particular position on the social issues students are debating, then the debate context offers an excellent chance for students to discover, through rhetorical analysis, the empathy they may have for points of view held by others in society.

Mirra's (2018) third and fourth chapters concern ways in which civic engagement can be encouraged through particular research methodologies. She first describes her experience teaching with what she calls youth participatory action research (YPAR), a process that stresses the value of considering students to be knowledge producers who can conduct research designed to question the epistemologies of the civic and educational context in which they live. Students are encouraged to do various forms of primary research, as well as to use oral histories or other forms of personal investigation in order to interrogate how and why particular social issues or groups are discussed the way they are. As with the structuring of units in the chapters on warrior-scholars or debate teams, we again see units centered on social issues, with texts chosen to create opportunities for research designed to accentuate civic engagement. Mirra goes on to explore how student research and discussion can also be encouraged through "connected learning," which seeks to maximize the positive results possible when students connect with peers via technology and find sources of knowledge beyond the school. Mirra claims that

*when learning is openly networked, it moves beyond the walls of the classroom space and into the wider world, where it gains authenticity and relevance and becomes accessible to a wide audience that can take it up and apply it in novel ways.* (p. 73)

The fourth chapter ends on a sobering note, however, with a discussion of how technology tends to be welcomed in schools when it can be posited as providing job skills or educational efficiencies but discouraged when it allows students increased personal freedom or alternate forms of connection. Mirra sees this dichotomy as a symptom of a neoliberal bias in which public education is assumed to exist primarily to ensure the future economic success of students rather than the civic engagement Mirra feels is vital to the health of the very society that created the public school system in the first place.

The book's fifth chapter continues this reflective turn, as Mirra (2018) examines the role teachers believe their own civic identities play in their ability to employ critical civic empathy in the classroom. The chapter acknowledges that despite teachers' individual interests, courses take place within a wider context of a school administration and surrounding community and that the values of those wider contexts can often complicate or contradict a teacher's attempts to maintain a focus on civic engagement. Mandated standardized testing, state regulations, district curriculum requirements, individual school traditions—any working public school teacher would be familiar with the influence, positive and negative, of all of these factors. Mirra makes a questionable assertion here that

*English is arguably one of the more skill-based disciplines that students encounter in high school—unlike the disciplines of history and science, in which content is specific, English teachers have the choice of a myriad of texts with which to reinforce literacy skills.* (p. 93)

History teachers could certainly point out that they also deal with teaching skills involved in critical investigation of established

narratives, and science teachers might have similar objections, since hypotheses and inquiry seem fundamental to the scientific method. To be fair, Mirra's goal is to point out that surveys of English language arts teachers reveal that there are many different approaches or focuses possible in literacy classrooms and that teachers would benefit from examining whether what they personally value actually lines up with what their pedagogy delivers. The most obvious and prevalent tension lies of course in the role of grades and test preparation in schools and the ways in which passive acceptance of traditional grading systems and "standardized" (scare quotes mine) tests runs counter to the spirit of critique and questioning encouraged by a critical civic empathy curriculum.

Teachers looking for practical ideas and examples of effective literacy units focused on social issues will find much of use in *Educating for Empathy*, and Mirra's (2018) concern with differentiating active, socially engaged empathy from passive personal kindness is insightful and important. As an experienced educator—though she is now an assistant professor at Rutgers, she began her career as a high school teacher in Brooklyn, New York—Mirra also brings a great understanding of on-the-ground realities of teaching in contemporary American public schools, and she discusses curricular implications with great clarity. I was struck a number of times, however, by her reticence—especially in a book copublished by the National Writing Project—to discuss the role of writing in literacy classrooms. The kinds of student-empowering pedagogies Mirra is interested in have of course been espoused for many decades in the field of rhetoric and composition, notably in works like Elbow's (1981) and Flower's (1994). Mirra's chapters on debate and research offer teachers many ideas but also seem to stop short of connecting the ways in which

sharpening rhetorical skills and occupying the position of knowledge producer can be quite natural when students are encouraged to do so via personal writing. Perhaps the role of writing in the curriculum was considered beyond the purview of Mirra's discussion and debate-focused examples, but I would love to have heard her thoughts on it.

The book's conclusion, however, is both insightful and of pressing importance. Mirra (2018) is quite sensitive, and rightly so, to the ways in which "empathy," in the abstract, can easily become a tool that reinscribes, rather than reveals, the inequities in our society:

*Members of majority groups need multiple, meaningful, and sustained opportunities to deconstruct their own privileges and get to know individuals from groups other than their own. Simply reading a text or two by an author is not enough and actually can end up reinforcing rather than breaking down stereotypes. (p. 105)*

By outlining the ways in which empathy is useful in an educational context only when it used to promote critical thinking skills, student empowerment, and increased engagement, Mirra provides excellent guidelines for constructing more effective socially engaged curricula.

## References

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