# Democracy & Education

Dialogue for Democracy.
A Book Review of *Democratic Discord in Schools*

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L EVINSON AND FAY'S *Democratic Discord in Schools: Cases and Commentaries in Educational Ethics* (2019) is an unusual book, at least as far as academic works go. Rather than one author or group of authors pursuing a single line of argument throughout the book, it is structured around eight "case studies" with accompanying commentaries. These cases range from fictionalized (but recognizable) narratives (Chapters 2, 4, 7, and 8) to accounts of real-world events in actual places (Chapters 3 and 6) to summaries of existing policies and practices (Chapters 5 and 9). Each chapter focuses on a single core issue facing schools today, such as digital surveillance of students' online activity, the best responses to student walkouts, and the appropriate place of politically charged topics in classroom debates. Following each case study are six brief commentaries offering a variety of perspectives on the issue raised in the case study. These commentaries are written by practitioners, scholars, other stakeholders, and even (on two occasions) students, and their readings of the cases and responses to them differ widely.

At first, this structure—commentaries from diverse perspectives, all responding to the same case—might seem to be a welcome change from the singular voice we are used to reading in academic journal articles and books. But what first appears to be this book's greatest strength turns out to be its greatest weakness. The book (2019) swings too far to the other extreme, replacing a monovocal argument with a mosaic of incompatible voices. In order to genuinely help us understand the divergent perspectives and the disagreements among them, we would need more than
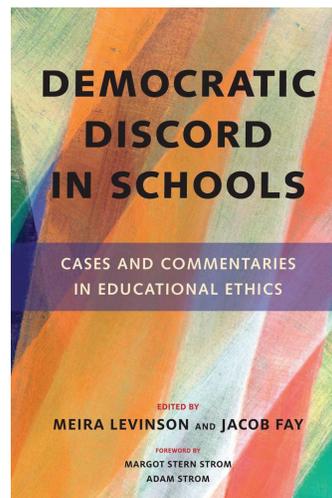
three to four pages from each contributor. One way to do this would be to have the same five or six core voices respond to *all* the cases, so we can see how the same viewpoint handles different situations. Of course, this structure might be too contrived, since different perspectives will be relevant to different cases. But at the very least, it would help to have the commentators respond not only to the cases themselves but also to one another. Otherwise, we are left with a situation in which one commentator argues for "the necessity of neutrality" (254) while another argues against "the myth of neutrality" (268), and the reader has no way of thinking about how to resolve (or even understand) this incompatibility.

Moreover, it is not clear *how* diverse the included voices are. There are real disagreements among them, but they largely share a particular vision of schooling. In their closing editorial summary, Levinson and Fey (2019) point out that schools in democracy have three roles: they are "legal agents of the state, responsible for implementing democratically enacted public policies and laws . . . [,] *objects* of adults' and students' ongoing democratic expression and

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engagement . . . [, and] sites of civic preparation for future democratic citizens" (pp. 272–273, emphasis original). For the most part, the various contributors agree on these *purposes* of schooling in democracy, while disagreeing on the best *means* to achieve those purposes, the most pressing *threats* to those purposes, or the most appropriate way to *prioritize* those purposes. In some of the case studies, a few more conservative perspectives do appear, such as a Trump-voting parent in Chapter 2 and a teacher who wants to teach her student the "right" way to read a global map in Chapter 8. But the infrequency of these appearances and the lack of depth with which their arguments are articulated make them feel tokenistic, rather than legitimate partners in the conversation.

Of course, no book, however multivocal, can include *all* variations, nor does it need to. In fact, the focus and general agreement of the commentaries may derive from the case studies themselves. Surveying the issues that the editors (Levinson & Fey, 2019) choose to highlight—inclusivity in the midst of political diversity, school walkouts, the role of law enforcement in protecting schools, digital surveillance, culturally and ethnically focused charter schools, politically controversial discussion topics, culturally responsive curriculum, and teacher speech—two things stand out. First, this is a collection of issues that is most likely to concern Left-leaning, social-justice-oriented educators (as opposed to, for instance, educators with a classical or perennialist orientation). And second, these are all highly contemporary issues. With the possible exception of the chapter on digital surveillance, all the issues are framed in a way that is clearly informed by the Trump presidency and the anxieties it has created for various minority populations and people with Left-leaning political views. To be sure, all these issues have been around since long before the 2016 presidential election, and the case studies and commentaries do address the relevant history. But there is a consistent sense that things are different (read: more heightened, more concerning, more urgent) today, and there is little effort made to consider how the nature of the issues—or even what we consider a relevant issue—might change under a different administration.

That said, the problem may be less with the commentaries and cases and more with the reader—or rather, the reader's context. A single reader working their way sequentially through the book for purposes of a review is about as far from the book's intended use(s) as it is possible to get. In their concluding chapter, the editors (Levinson & Fey, 2019) point out, "This book is designed to be *used*, in addition to being read . . . We would be disappointed if this book were viewed solely as a text to be read *about* the politics of democratic education, rather than a tool to be used to *enable* democratic education and engagement with diverse others" (p. 271, emphases original). They offer guidelines for facilitating productive discussions and describe a range of configurations in which current teachers, teacher education students, administrators, community members, or other groups might come together to discuss the cases and commentaries,

either individually or in thematically related combinations (pp. 277–281). Their hope is that the book's various components will serve "as prompts for collective democratic engagement around hard problems" (p. 277). The reason for this emphasis on collective dialogue is that "it is important to reason through these difficult dilemmas *together*, *with* our colleagues rather than *without* them, in the faculty common room rather than behind closed classroom doors" (p. 5, emphasis added).

Although the book could be used in a wide variety of contexts, as the editors (Levinson & Fey, 2019) indicate, one of the most helpful uses might be to facilitate dialogue between and among constituents who are known to have different perspectives on schools—for instance, teachers and parents, administrators and teachers, or even (with some modifications) students and adults. (Such groups might benefit all the more from deliberative dialogue when differences of politics, culture, or religion heighten differences of positionality with respect to schools.) In particular, Levinson and Fey observe, "It is easier and often more constructive to talk about a dilemma that is realistic, but not specifically one that the community is facing at that moment. Deliberation that is one step removed from an actual problem can help diffuse tensions. It can also help people recognize that even those with whom they disagree about what to do in a particular dilemma are likely motivated by good intentions and recognizable values" (p. 6). It is important to build such understanding and respect *before* the community faces a conflict of its own; in fact, it may be impossible to do so afterward.

In the context of trying to facilitate dialogue across various lines of difference, the brevity of the cases and commentaries becomes a strength, not a drawback. As the editors (Levinson & Fey, 2019) note, each excerpt stands alone and can be read in a matter of minutes, thus making the discussion accessible even for the busiest of participants. Furthermore, because the cases do not depend on one another, dialogue facilitators can choose whichever topics are most likely to interest their participants, thereby mitigating my concern that the topics draw too heavily on one particular historical moment and political orientation. Even the fragmentation of the views represented may serve some purpose by giving dialogue participants language with which to make sense of the diverse and conflicting ways we approach questions of schooling in the United States today and by creating space for the voicing of unpopular or minority views (even those that are not represented in the cases and commentaries themselves). If used as part of such dialogue, there is reason to hope that the cases and commentaries in this book may truly become springboards for developing greater understanding and respect across differences. The only way to know for sure is to try.

References

Levinson, M., & Fay, J. (2019). *Democratic discord in schools: Cases and commentaries in educational ethics*. Harvard Education Press.