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# Democracy & Education

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## Toward a Pedagogy of Cooperative Learning.

A Review of *Education and Democratic Participation:*

*The Making of Learning Communities*

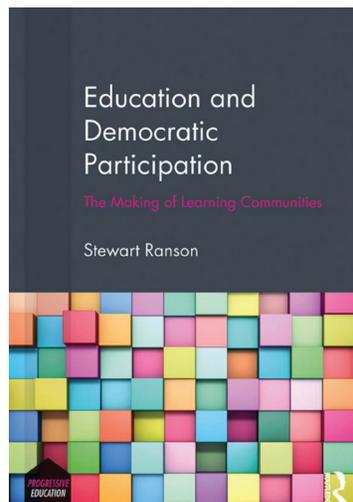
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**E** *EDUCATION AND DEMOCRATIC Participation* (2018) is a timely contribution to the tradition of social democratic progressive education. Recognizing progressive education has become a contested concept, understood by those in the tradition of social democratic progressive education and those in the tradition of neo-liberal progressive education, Ranson (2018) proposes that “only the social justice tradition is truly universalistic in purpose and conse-

quence” (p. xv). He asks in the book, ultimately, “What can education contribute to this process of remaking democracy” (p. xiii)? Drawing upon political thought and political philosophy, public management and social psychology, as well as education theory and practice, Ranson develops a critique of current neoliberalism through a critical pedagogy of democratic learning that can provide the basis to remake a social democracy of opportunity and justice for all.

Ranson (2018) sets out by identifying three historically competing traditions of education: (a) the tradition of selective education, (b) the tradition of social democratic comprehensive education, and (c) the tradition of neoliberal market choice education. They are significant in our time given the problems that emerge with selective and neoliberal education and the potential resources within social democratic education to resolve them. Ranson rightly argues that social democratic comprehensive education largely has been taken over by neoliberal market choice education. Specifically, he highlights neoliberal restructuring of education in ways such as contraction of finance, classification and selection in pedagogy and



assessment, and nationalizing and corporatizing the governance of schools. The way out, Ranson argues, is to remake the present; to enable a new generation of assertion and struggle for an educated democracy; to enable all citizens become makers of meaning, value and material distribution; and to see citizens as makers, not just voters.

Ranson (2018) examines the conditions for remaking democracy through participation of citizens building upon multiple intellectual resources. He draws on Arendt and argues “that ‘natality,’ beginning anew, is possible if citizens are willing to rediscover their fundamental agency” (p. 32), that is, their agency to take actions, to speak in the public sphere, and to remember the common good. He highlights three common goods—mutual recognition, public reason, and material equality—that are necessary conditions for constituting social democracy. He again draws upon Arendt’s “theory of making as constituting a new beginning, a public space of participation and deliberation that is appropriate to the transformations required to address the present collective action dilemmas” (p. 56). That is, citizens are makers of public worlds, with the capability to take actions, to begin anew, to

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participate, and to remake polity. Further, he draws upon de Tocqueville's, Mill's, and Dewey's theories of democratic participation. For example, de Tocqueville argued that citizens' participation could work to improve democracy; Mill argued that participation educates people, which can enable citizens to cultivate the common good; and Dewey promoted democracy as a community of inquiry that would restore the importance of the public good in society. Lastly, he draws upon the radical thought from Freire that argues democracy will only fulfill its educational potential when collective participation transforms the structure of power and domination. With these theorists, Ranson believes, "democracy can be strengthened to influence everyday life as well as collective decision making and power structures of communities" (p. 101). Teachers, artists, cultural workers, as well as ordinary citizens can remake democratic communities.

With the theoretical exploration of the conditions for remaking democratic transformation, Ranson (2018) offers a pedagogy of cooperative learning building on the intellectual resources from Dewey and Vygotsky. Though from very different cultural backgrounds and disciplinary traditions, for Ranson, Dewey and Vygotsky "developed complementary pedagogies of collaborative agency and participation" (p. 106). Building upon Dewey's theory of learning as a community of inquiry and Vygotsky's theory of learning as a movement of collaborative development, Ranson develops a pedagogy for remaking cooperative learning communities that re-imagines learners as "prospective citizens" and as "co-operative makers of democratic communities in which they are to live and work" (p. 118). Ranson further explains the pedagogy of cooperative learning, the values and purposes of which are to produce capable citizens through lifelong learning; the nature of which is to realize identity and agency; the condition of which grows out of mutual recognition; the practices of which are in different modalities, not just in school or college but potentially in all spheres of living, at home in the community, at work, and in the polity.

The pedagogy of cooperative learning requires institutional support, which encourages the voice of citizens and the public spaces to express them. In order for citizens to speak out, first, they should have "the capability to find a voice to speak out with others in the public square" (Ranson, 2018, p. 136), with "voice" defined as any attempt to change, not necessarily negation, but also an essential expression of re-constructive development. Second, the citizens' obligations "are actively to participate and contribute to the life and deliberations of the dilemmas facing the public sphere" (p. 136). Voice thus is communicative action, an act of agency. Further, Ranson identifies several dimensions of voice and communication to apply as criteria in assessing progress in the participation of voluntary citizens, such as (a) the possibility of a reasonable conversation in the public sphere, i.e. public reason; (b) the inclusion of multiple voices in a many sided dialogue; and (c) the need for citizens to be able to speak in their own voice and manner of communication. Emerging practices of citizen participation in schools can be assessed through these dimensions.

Ranson (2018) offers new forms of democratic community governance, which he argues can be created to remake citizenship

for mutual recognition and accountability in civic society and identifies several principles for reconstituting the community governance of education. First, the purpose of education will need to reimagine learners as prospective citizens, as cooperative makers of democratic communities in which they are to live and work. Second, through enabling respect and mutual recognition, democracy is the only way of making communities that will create "the opportunity to actualize our common good together, principally the common wealth of each citizen's character and capability" (p. 166). Third, making such a community needs the constituting of justice and public reason as sacred common goods. Fourth, the democratic practice of citizenship is "to participate in the life of the community, speaking in one's own voice in conversation with others to reach shared understanding and agreements that empower the remaking of the community" (p. 167). Fifth, citizens learn through the experience and social dynamics of collaborative enquiry and transformation for a learning democracy to remake their communities. Through these principles, Ranson aims to foster the consciousness that "we are at a key historical juncture which requires a fundamental development in our democratic practice from passive to active citizenship in the making of community and society" (p. 184). This leads his argument to concluding that schools should be organized in democratic comprehensive campuses, rather than selective or market choice models.

Throughout the book, Ranson (2018) offers multiple intellectual resources from traditions of democratic theories, political philosophies, and educational thoughts, which make his book dense and complex. However, he illustrates abstract ideas with vignettes and cases studies as empirical demonstrations of how it works (or does not) in reality, which is one of the key features of the book. For example, after developing the analytical framework of voice as communicative action, Ranson further provides case studies in chapter six, which show parents as volunteer citizens speaking their voice in everyday communication with schools, in spaces like parent forums, and as governors in collective school decision-making. Through these examples of volunteer citizens, Ranson shows the significance of parental voice and the role of partnership, as well as the hidden pedagogy of the school, to provide the conditions of learning. Readers who seeks to understand how democratic comprehensive education works can understand it not only theoretically but also empirically through Ranson's case studies.

Despite the multiple traditions of theories and philosophies that Ranson (2018) draws from, I wish to have seen him develop a more systematic understanding, and application, of Amartya Sen's theories. Sen's ideas are present throughout the book, both implicitly and explicitly. For example, Ranson relies heavily on Sen's capabilities approach to develop a pedagogy for remaking learning community. Ranson argues that the values and purposes of the pedagogy of cooperative learning is to create "capable citizenship," with capabilities understood in the capabilities approach as "what a person is able to do and be" (p. 119). Ranson further spells out the distinctive cosmopolitan capabilities he envisions. However, Sen's thoughts, such as agency, public reason,

and the idea of justice are only alluded to briefly. For example, in discussing public reason, Ranson mentions briefly Rawls and Sen and goes quickly to focus on Gellner and Habermas (p. 42). In fact, in *Development as Freedom* and *The Idea of Justice*, as well as his other works, Sen (1999, 2009) develops his ideas of public reason and justice in details and could have been more helpful in Ranson's argument about parental participation, public reason, and agency.

Ranson (2018) raises many important philosophical questions for us to think about what education can do to remake democratic communities and offers many intellectual resources to explore this question in the book. While I have reservations about how public reason and democratic participation may look like in different contexts, or if it is even possible, in particular, in some top-down

regimes, I agree with Ranson that a pedagogy of cooperative learning can contribute a lot to reimagining democracy in the neoliberal time. I recommend this book to teachers and teacher educators, educational researchers and practitioners, political philosophers, and social scientists to begin anew and reimagine democracy in making learning communities.

## Reference

- Ranson, S. (2018). *Education and democratic participation: The making of learning communities*. Routledge.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (2009). *The idea of justice*. Harvard University Press.