
Democracy & Education

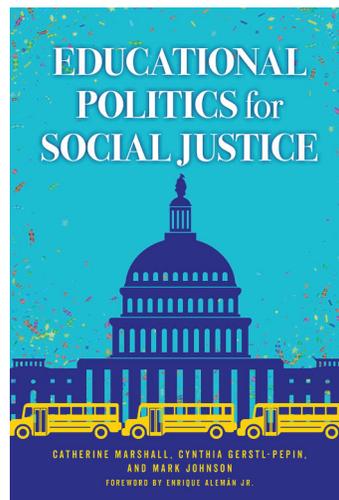
Undergoing Political Experience.

A Book Review of *Educational Politics for Social Justice*

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IT IS UNBEARABLY difficult to make sense of the complexity of experience while it is occurring, and as John Dewey (1917/2008) explained so many years ago, not only must we come *through* experience but often we must *struggle* through it, working through series of “undergoings” in the process of attempting to alter our path, such that life makes it evident to us that “. . . our active tryings are trials and tests of ourselves” (p. 9). Once we come through an experience, and if we feel inclined to construct some sense of meaning of both our efforts and the uncertainty, then we must take up the struggle yet again as we reflect and inquire in our attempt to construct meaning. As I sit here writing this—amid the enduring ambiguity of COVID-19, the deluge of imagery and stories documenting the traumatization of and brutality against this generation of Black and Brown people, the swell of love and protest in response, and the mounting dehumanization as circumstance is used to justify a proliferation of technological enforcements upon educational spaces—I have never been reminded more in my life that we beings are incapable of making sense while in the midst of the churn and chaos of experience.

I have spent a fair portion of the last decade immersed in circles of educational activism, and I am assuredly one of those people who attempted to make sense of the apparent contradictions of education policy while she was jumping in. My gut told me I would learn the most about the modes of power, the means for change, and the intricacies of school politics if I surrounded myself with people who had a history of “fighting the good fight” along the



picket lines, in the classrooms and school board meetings, and by navigating through the channels of our many and sometimes indistinct governmental systems. I do not believe I was wrong in this presumption, as it has provided me with a type of practical experience that I find invaluable when speaking to my current students about how they might imagine and then join others in doing the difficult work of making schools more just and humane places for children and communities.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the combination of the current political climate and my recent reading of the book *Educational Politics for Social Justice* (2020), has caused me to reflect on my early years as a teacher and parent and to recall what it felt like to be snapped to consciousness by the disorientation of a progression of increasingly bad policies—No Child Left Behind, followed by Race to the Top, and then the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Catherine Marshall, Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin, and Mark Johnson initiate readers to the fact that, though the U.S. education system

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has evolved out of a long and contentious history replete with overlapping aims, purposes, and forms of power that work with and against one another simultaneously, the public schools remain sites where groups of people and entities converge and engage in contested battles over what should become of our children and this society. The authors provide just enough historical examples in their text to give context for how forms of power have played out over decades through what they identify as the micro, district, state, federal, and global political arenas. As they explain, “Educating children often involves navigating a complex web of government services, special interest groups, the criminal justice system, business interests, medical services, community contexts, policies, and politics” (p. 161). Clearly one of the things that makes U.S. education policy so difficult to understand, much less to navigate mid-experience, especially for students or community members just learning to slog through the channels, is that each school, district, and state can vary so significantly in how they function. So, to say that we have “a system” of public education in the U.S. is too simplistic of a statement given the multitudinous variations. Thus, one of the points of value with this book is how it provides several modes of analysis for each of the five political arenas such that these can be utilized to help individuals and groups identify, critique, and work more strategically within their unique set of governmental structures. In addition to defining the varying dynamics of each arena, they make the argument that “. . . the realities of social and cultural inequities are often missing from mainstream policy and policy analysis,” and they thereby provide what they call “a social justice framework” to help readers develop critical modes of policy analysis such that they can locate the resulting disparities of the many forms of institutional oppression (racism, classism, sexism, etc.) that afflict public schooling experience in the U.S. (p. 151). Said simply, the groups and entities who vie to shape education policy do not always have the best interest of public school children in mind, and equity is not always the aim or the result of those battles. But it does not *have* to be this way, and it *can* be otherwise if the institution’s historical tendencies and the multitude of policy arenas are each understood as expressions of power.

As stated earlier, this book is a sound introduction into the complexities of education policy, especially for those who genuinely want to work toward equity. Though, in order to be truly effective on both fronts, this reading would need to be supplemented with extensive examinations into the many forms of institutional oppression, as the authors touch on them only very briefly in this piece. *Educational Politics for Social Justice* would be an ideal choice for introductory graduate level courses because it provides a good lay of the land, so to speak. I am sure it would leave the newly initiated reeling from learning about all the existent channels, networks, and divots that they may not have considered prior to their reading, and as a result, I anticipate that it could then provide an excellent springboard into deeper historical and/or localized analyses and lines of inquiry about power in schooling and struggles for change. Also, I do think this book would be a beneficial resource for those family members and teachers not only who feel baffled by the absurdities and contradictions they see in

schooling spaces but who yearn to get involved in undoing them by joining and organizing grassroots efforts. In my work with teachers and families, I have noticed how easy it is for people to become quickly overwhelmed as they learn more about these political arenas, not to mention also the webs of power and the national and global policy networks that all fight for the ability to influence, manipulate, and/or deculturalize their own children and students. I have seen several such people—some with no background in the field of education—evolve into inexhaustible bloggers as a result of their awakening to the vastness of these webs. It can be very easy to get caught up in the immediacy of the local, such that we sometimes neglect to look outward as well—that is, to think globally—and see how discourses and assumptions close to home are also being shaped by the seemingly distant policymakers and national and global interest groups. Thus, I believe education activists, community organizers, and bloggers might also benefit from the authors’ analysis of the larger institutions of power.

Though I see this book as a survey text, this is not to say that it is only beneficial to those who are new to this aspect of the field. As someone who is familiar with what it means to struggle within and to study most of these political arenas, I found the book to be helpful especially because it articulated many of the dynamics that I have experienced yet failed to conceptualize over the last decade. One such example includes their comparative analysis of state governance structures. That is, I have lived in three states in the last seven years, each with significant variations in political culture, and seeing these frameworks helped me make some sense of my differing political experiences and my understanding of each state. Another example is their explanation of policy diffusion and the way that states, through competition and pressure, tend to influence one another to adopt and sometimes resist educational trends and practices. Needless to say, this concept clearly articulated what many of us witnessed with the roll out of the Race to the Top grants as well as with the adoption, and then some states’ rejection, of Common Core State Standards. So, for readers who may be involved in cross-state coalition building and grassroots movements, the authors bring together numerous frameworks that can help illuminate some of the nuances of state-based political cultures, thereby opening up the possibility for organizers to imagine what alternative strategies might look like and how we might better utilize those differences.

The final chapter offers a range of suggestions for what can be done to “center justice,” as the authors say, in our political arenas. The authors also draw upon a few grassroots movements throughout the book for inspiration and to illustrate the theories in practice. They make specific mention of the Moral Mondays Movement, which sprung out of North Carolina and soon spread to other states; the Opt Out movement, which was carried out in many states by parents, teachers, and students who aimed to resist high-stakes testing; and the School Strike for Climate environmental protests led by Swedish student Greta Thunberg that then went global via social media. Each of these are wonderful examples of grassroots efforts, and the Moral Mondays Movement has been especially impressive given the span of social concerns driving their platform and the victories they have won on so many fronts.

For a book on education policy, though, I think it would have been most beneficial for the authors to explore with great detail at least one grassroots movement that has (a) an enduring legacy beyond a few years and (b) a specific focus on social justice in public education. The Journey for Justice Alliance (<https://j4jalliance.com/>) could be one such group, as they have been at this work for nearly a decade—calling attention to and struggling against the racism inherent to education reform—and are actively organizing in over thirty major urban communities across the country. Another example could be the decades-long struggle to ensure that all students are guaranteed access to ethnic studies courses in K–12 and college curricula. The longstanding efforts and broad coalition work of youth, families, educators, and organizations have ensured the successful passing of such legislation in several states in recent years. California is certainly an exemplar in this regard and demonstrates of how grassroots educational activism is most effective when it involves many different stakeholders from within the communities themselves (López, forthcoming; see also <https://www.savecaethnicstudies.org/> and <http://www.ethnicstudiesnow.com/>). I would also suggest that the authors turn toward students here in the U.S. who are also doing amazing work on the ground—looking locally and globally—because they

too warrant not only our attention but our respect as innovative and dedicated leaders of change. Groups like the Providence Student Union (<https://www.pvdstudentunion.org/>), the Newark Students Union (<https://sites.google.com/view/newarkstudentsunion/home>), and the indigenous-led environmental organization called Earth Guardians (<https://www.earthguardians.org/>) are just a few youth movements deserving of our attention if we aim to inform our understanding of what it means to undergo amid the chaos of political experience and to genuinely engage in the lifelong struggle for a more humane and just world.

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