
Democracy & Education

Too Much Storytelling, Too Little Democracy

A Book Review of *Critical Issues in Democratic Schooling*

Bridget Brett (Bucknell University), Emma Curtin (Bucknell University), Sue Ellen Henry (Bucknell University), Lili Kilkenny (Bucknell University), Maddyson Mallory (Bucknell University), Daija Mislner (Bucknell University), Bess Murad (Bucknell University), Lucia Singer (Bucknell University)

Abstract

The authors are representatives of EDUC 308/608: Democracy and Education. This advanced seminar in social foundations of education studied the relationship between democracy and educational practices, with an emphasis on practicing democracy while engaging in deep study. This course is an upper-level offering in the Education Department at Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

AS PART OF an education course called Democracy and Education at Bucknell

University, this group has chosen to collaboratively coauthor this book review. Our class has run itself as a democratic collective; we designed our syllabus, wrote our assignments, delivered course content, and constructed our grading schema. This is just one way we have attempted to disrupt traditional faculty-driven and top-down models of knowledge transmission.

We represent varied P12 educational backgrounds and political positions in order to offer a cogent review of *Critical Issues in Democratic Schooling: Curriculum, Teaching, and Socio-Political Realities*, by Kenneth Teitelbaum. In preparing this review, we each read the text deeply and over the course of two months discussed the book in detail. Most of us read an online version of the text, and page references in this review are drawn from the online version. Given our course aims and unique structure, we were hopeful that the text would add to our collective understanding of the relationship between public education and democratic functioning in the



United States. While there are aspects of this book that may be valuable for some audiences, we are disappointed with the text's capacity to enhance our own understanding of democracy and educational principles.

This book examines how improvements to various facets of education *could* contribute to a more democratic practice of schooling. Using both his own anecdotal evidence as well as theoretical recommendations for other educators, Teitelbaum attempts to offer

solutions to the social ills that manifest themselves in education today. The merits of this book include its accessibility and the essay-style chapters, which allow each chapter to potentially stand alone. The short chapters provide strong narratives that make it easy for the reader to stay engaged throughout the entirety of the text.

While Teitelbaum's text does present an overview of various related topics in education, he fails to communicate a clear, distinct argument regarding democratic schooling. In fact, some chapters of the book neglect to mention democracy at all. Teitelbaum

presents various claims throughout the book, including an endorsement of a career in education, a rejection of neoliberalism influence in the classroom, a call to critically assess the values behind curricula, and an acknowledgment of factors that contribute to the achievement gap. While there is a conceivable connection between all of these topics and democratic schooling, Teitelbaum does not explicitly relate each chapter to his overarching argument for the book, making his purpose for the work unclear.

Unfortunately, the title of the text makes promises that the content does not fulfill. While each chapter provides interesting insights into the author's perspective of democratic education, Teitelbaum's fundamental conception of democracy remains undertheorized and unexplained. Nowhere in the text does Teitelbaum define "democracy" or offer a concrete link between his recommendations and a furthering of democratic functioning in schools that could benefit students and society. Without this foundation, Teitelbaum's discussion of critical issues within "democratic schooling" lacks context and clarity. For example, on page 11, Teitelbaum offers that the goal of the book is to "communicate substantively and clearly with those who might consider a rigorous commitment to education for strong democracy." He does not revisit this idea again until page 36, and even then, only briefly. In short, Teitelbaum lacks a theoretical underpinning to build his arguments on and he fails to adequately deliver a clear picture of what democratic schooling means.

The format of the book distracts from the central argument of democracy as a crucial aspect of all realms of educational decision-making, as implied in the title. Teitelbaum alternates between personal anecdotes and other supporting evidence applied to the main idea of each chapter. While the chapters are easy to read and interesting, there is little connection between the chapters, resulting in a book of collected chapters rather than a text that presents an evolving argument arc related to a central claim. For example, in a chapter intended to explain how poverty interrupts democracy as a central outcome of public schooling, Teitelbaum spends significant space reflecting on his own life without poverty. The inclusion of this personal information overshadows the purpose of this chapter, leaving readers without a clear sense for the impact of poverty on democratic aims of public education. This is a common issue throughout the entire book; many chapters

include substantial subsections with personal information that do not connect directly to a central claim or claims about the relationship between schools and democratic functioning.

The author also frequently digresses from the main focus of each chapter into tangents. These tangents often include information that appears largely irrelevant to the chapter, creating an inability for the reader to distinguish between Teitelbaum's argument and extraneous details. An example of one such tangent is the entirety of Chapter 12, in which Teitelbaum explains in detail the curriculum for socialist schools during the 1920s. Twenty paragraphs are spent outlining the themes of a socialist curriculum with no attempt to tie back this information to the central argument of the book.

The sustained autobiographical nature of this book, coupled with a lack of continuity between chapters, does not lend itself for this work to be used in the curriculum of classes such as our own. However, this book could be useful in teacher education and for those who are looking for topical examinations of school issues from the point of view of a long-time educator and scholar whose work spans many educational eras. Those who wish to learn from experiential reflection and personal anecdotes may be especially drawn to this text. As an autobiographical reflection on a lifetime of teaching, it serves its purpose. The first half of the book is useful at reminding readers why teachers are important figures in responding to social inequalities in schools. He provides copious examples of how politicians and educators have tried to address equity and equality issues in the classroom throughout his lifetime. This background history allows the reader to critically analyze issues and solutions surrounding democratic schooling. The second half of the book focuses on important components of community and schooling. This book serves as a good starting point for people interested in current issues in education, who may want to begin exploring problems through the lens of someone with a lifetime of experience as an educator. Teitelbaum has a great deal of wisdom and crucial experience, which make the book compelling to read. Teitelbaum's insights generated from a long career in education could be valuable for younger generations of teachers who want to begin to tackle problems in schooling.

References

Teitelbaum, K. (2020). *Critical issues in democratic schooling*. Routledge.