
Democracy & Education

Improving Democracy Education

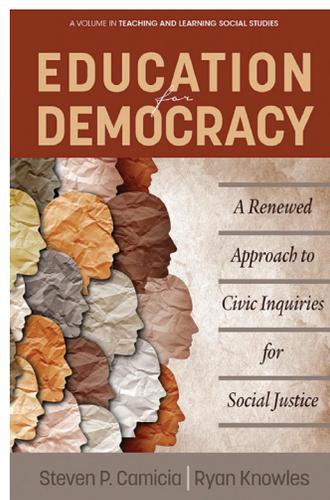
A Book Review of *Education for Democracy: A Renewed Approach to Civic Inquiries for Social Justice*

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American democracy is facing a challenge not seen in generations. Extreme polarization has led to 65% of Republicans believing that Democrats stole the 2020 presidential election, despite a lack of evidence (Milligan, 2021), and these false election allegations resulted in an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Across the country, several state legislatures are working to further restrict voting access (Viebeck, 2021); polls show that 70% of American millennials do not think it is essential to live in a country governed by a democratic rule of law (Westheimer, 2019), highlighting the need for a shift in how we approach the education of students in our democracy in order to develop critical thinkers who see the benefits of democracy and will take action to protect it. Into this upheaval comes *Education for Democracy: A Renewed Approach to Civic Inquiries for Social Justice*, a welcome addition from authors Steven P. Camicia and Ryan Knowles to the discussion that proposes a renewed model for educating students to be critical citizens in support of democracy.

Overview

Camicia and Knowles (2021) organize their argument through six chapters. The introduction grounds the reader in the historical importance and current tensions regarding democracy. This overview provides the reader with the understanding of important related terminology, and Chapter 2 serves as a more specified overview for the reader, introducing them to the conceptions, classifications, and discourses of democracy. This chapter truly



focuses on the question: How does democracy function in society? While the primary focus of this chapter is on the ideological understanding of democracy, the chapter concludes with the authors stating their stance on the matter: “Democracy is fundamentally revolutionary because of an overarching goal of empowerment and social justice. It is a vision of just communities where citizens are charged with understanding and addressing community issues within the context of shifting power relations” (p. 39). In this conclusion, they also introduce their adopted and previously described model of democratic education. The authors make a brief connection between their model and the preceding parts of the chapter in which they discuss the philosophical connections to the agonistic, multicultural, and decolonizing discourses of democracy (p. 40).

In the following three chapters, Camicia and Knowles (2021) address specific applications of their education for democracy model. In Chapter 3, the authors discuss why and how students need to discuss seemingly controversial issues surrounding topics, such as politics, social justice, and gender. The chapter, while brief, connects back to the stance of the authors that students be empowered in the classroom to question boundaries and search outside of traditional binary choices (pp. 52–62). In addition, Chapter 4

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transitions from the act of offering students opportunities to engage with controversial issues to the act of providing students structure for deliberation of these issues. Moving into Chapter 5, Camicia and Knowles take a bit of a disconnected leap from their discussion of classroom applications of their model into issues and opportunities presented to democratic education by social media and the internet. While not focused on the model per se, Chapter 5 does shed light on important topics that would affect the modern educator's ability to apply the model in their classroom. Lastly, the authors conclude the book with Chapter 6 by restating their reasoning for their view of education for democracy and calling for educators who wish to implement their stance and model to persevere against expected adversity (pp. 109–110).

Foundational Arguments

Camicia and Knowles (2021) make the case that our overidealized notions of democratic communities, especially in classrooms, do not address the inequalities that exist in society.

The authors challenge the predominant deliberative model of civic education that stresses neutrality and objectivity by the educator, allowing for classroom discussion intended to prepare students for future political engagement. But it leaves no room to consider dissenting voices, like the approaches of critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theories that stress the inequalities in democratic society. The deliberative model “can create an overidealized notion of civic life, where the best ideas and the most ethical individuals will indeed win, thus contributing to the common good. Such an approach ignores existing inequitable power structures and fails to prepare young learners to be active citizens working to support democracy” (p. 5). In comparison, Camicia and Knowles envision “democratic communities that are critically inclusive, which requires a critical orientation toward civic education for social justice” (p. 41)—an assertion we doctoral students thought echoed many of Dewey's philosophical ideas. To fill this gap in how classrooms provide spaces for questioning power and promoting civic engagement, the authors take a critical theoretical approach in Chapter 2 and create a pragmatic, sociocultural, critical working model for teachers to use in today's diverse classrooms.

Camicia and Knowles (2021) provide such a model extracted from Young (2002) and critical theorists. Their practical, student-centered model, composed of three tiers, creates opportunities for students to engage with multiple perspectives and highlights their varying experiences. The three tiers—the greeting, the rhetoric, and the narrative—center on an embrace of a multicultural perspective, which is often lacking in traditional classrooms, and attempt to develop the critical habits necessary to thrive in a robust democratic society. This model aims for teachers to create opportunities that demand collaboration, critical thinking, and discourse that better prepare students for democratic participation. Furthermore, the critical perspective of the model provides the opportunity for various perspectives and allows for student-centered deliberation, uncommon in traditional classrooms (Camicia & Knowles, 2021). The authors state, “Our vision is also postmodern because meaning and communication are structured by power relations” (Camicia & Knowles, 2021, p. 41). We agree with the

authors that words and language have power, and they weave this assumption throughout their explanation of discussion and deliberation within their model and recommendations. Through the model, students are provided the opportunity to challenge the status quo and work toward a fair and just society in which all perspectives from diverse backgrounds are heard—critical in a high-functioning democracy.

Resolving Theory

Throughout the book, Camicia and Knowles (2021) posit their stances clearly around the topic of democratic education. In addition, the authors focus on critical theory aspects, such as supporting social justice while upholding a postmodernist stance in relation to democracy. They state, “Our stance is that democracy is fundamentally revolutionary because of an overarching goal of empowerment and social justice . . . [It] requires a postmodern stance on power” (p. 40). Traditionally, critical theory and postmodernism stem from different ontological positions. Critical theory tends to lend itself toward a realist view of the world in which universal truths exist, and therefore, through deliberation, humans can arrive at these truths. In contrast, postmodernism leans toward a more nominalist or relativist view in which there are equally valid truths and, therefore, no universal truth exists. The authors' attempt to explain the actual merging of theory and postmodernism is limited to a few short paragraphs in Chapter 2.

This discussion needs to be expanded for the reader to have a firm sense of the theoretical foundation with practical solutions of the model proposed in the book. While we appreciate the attention to the different views of democracy, we believe more discussion by Camicia and Knowles (2021) is needed to clarify how their theoretical model could be replicated in the classroom with their proposed outcomes. For example, if multiple representations of many different perspectives are included with a consideration of power, how will this lead to increased social justice? These different perspectives will most likely be complex and contradictory and may not lead to a clear consensus. For example, change for postmodernists is uncertain, deconstructive, and reconstructive while critical theorists view change as reflective and transformative for the oppressed and the public good (Stinson & Bullock, 2012). However, these theories are not entirely incompatible, but the risky nature of drawing from different paradigms requires the authors to provide concrete examples of how these perspectives could be addressed to support redistributions of power for social justice. In our view, the chapter that applies the lens to social media in the classroom did not address these issues. Camicia and Knowles (2021) do not explicitly cite critical postmodern theory, but the hybrid combination results in a synergy between the praxis of critical theory and uncertainty of postmodernism that is challenging for researchers and teachers (Stinson & Bullock, 2012). This hybridity can be worthwhile when done well, but we were not entirely convinced as readers.

What about John Dewey?

Camicia and Knowles (2021) assert that social movements, and not a model of democracy centered on voting, were responsible for the

expansion of democracy over the past century. They write, “The efforts and successes of these movements highlight the deficiency of a model of democracy centered on voting and requires an understanding of social movements and social change, as well as political process into education for democracy” (p. 3). Their conceptions seem to eschew explicit connections to the body of work of Dewey (1939/1976, 1984), who in 1939 articulated and advocated for a “democratic way of life” that is a far more expansive view of democracy and citizenship than just voting.

Camicia and Knowles (2021) opted for an approach that draws parallels to Dewey’s work, but rather than frame their work through Dewey, the authors took an approach that renews Dewey’s ideas through a more contemporary, critical, and postmodern lens. Dewey forcefully advocated for a much more expansive view of citizenship as a democratic way of life, that “democracy can be successfully met only by the creation of personal attitudes in individual human beings, that we must get over our tendency to think its defense can be found in any external means” (Dewey, 1976, n.p.). He decried a lack of civil discourse in politics and public affairs and a general apathy about self-governance in the country. Concepts and approaches similar to Dewey’s run throughout book, and as such, we would have encouraged a more nuanced and direct inclusion of Dewey in light of the noticeable similarities in philosophies.

Other Considerations

As a group of teachers, administrators, higher-education professionals, and full-time graduate students, we had conflicting opinions on the relevance and accessibility of this book for the intended audience of K–12 teachers and schools. Some of us thought that the theoretical framework might seem a bit complex and esoteric for the average teacher in the classroom. On the contrary, others thought the writing was simple and clear to the point that they could see themselves applying this model in their classrooms with support from administrators and parents in their school district.

Additionally, Camicia and Knowles (2021) make a call to action for readers at the end of the book, by writing, “Authentic education for democracy requires vigilance. However, teachers and schools do not have to do this alone. Instead, teachers and schools working towards democracy should work in solidarity” (p. 110). We believe the authors fell short on the implementation of the call, the “so what?” For instance, while the authors provide detailed instructions on how educators can and should change their classroom approach to support a critical pedagogy toward civic education, they don’t offer how educators can and should work together to create that “solidarity” that would create a movement to advocate for space to do this work across classrooms and schoolhouses. Should teachers find allies at the schoolhouse level to build solidarity for this new approach, or should they work at the state level to seek changes in laws and regulations that impede those changes? Or should teachers engage their unions to provide a broader understanding of how education for democracy can be more inclusive? Additionally, what message should be crafted to

begin the broader discussion outside the classroom? Unfortunately, any concerted movement right now toward many of the ideas and proposals in the book could be viewed negatively by the parents and activists who are currently pushing back on school boards and educators trying to address issues of equity, diversity, and social justice. But that challenge is exactly what Camicia and Knowles insist is vital. A challenge to the status quo is probably a necessary step, but building a bridge to get from our current, polarized views of democracy to the authors’ more equitable and representative one is needed. Teachers may find it difficult to introduce the author’s ideas in a more polarized environment, and the book does not cover the scope of how that might be done. The authors write, “democracy is a value-biased proposition that requires individuals and groups to recognize inequitable power relations, the value of expression, inclusion, and participation in political and social spaces” (p. 5), and that is exactly right, but how we get there is much more challenging.

Final Thoughts

Camicia and Knowles (2021) offer a timely recipe for addressing the lack of civic competence in America, which is facing a great threat to democracy. Their student-centered model for democracy education in the classroom, outlined in their *Education for Democracy*, aims to bring a critical approach to teaching students in a manner that is authentic and that promotes multiculturalism. While we believe their contribution is well thought out, we contend that the authors needed to explain more fully how its theoretical model connects to desired outcomes and also offer readers a clearer path to implementation. Likewise, we would have liked to see a more explicit reference to Dewey, whose writings nearly a century ago presaged the approach in this work. That said, *Education for Democracy* ought to become an inspiration and a reference manual for those educators who care deeply about democracy education.

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