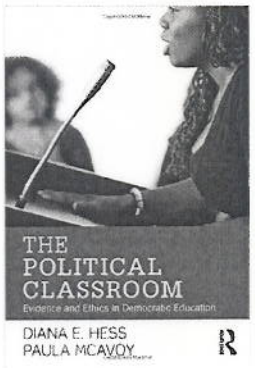
Democracy & Education

Necessary But Not Sufficient: Deweyan Dialogue and the Demands of Critical Citizenship

A Book Review of *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education Help*

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THE POLITICAL CLASSROOM: *Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (Routledge, 2015), by Hess and McAvoy, is a book far bigger than its 247 pages. It is a significant work that insightfully contributes to the mainstream body of literature about citizenship education in schools and its relationship to civic life in American society. It is an evidence-rich extension of Hess's earlier work, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (Routledge, 2009). The questions that weave in and around both of these studies come from a concern regarding the development of engaged, tolerant, and empathetic citizens in an era of increasing social inequality and political polarization. This work draws on an extensive longitudinal study (2005–2009) that included 1,001 students and 35 teachers from 21 midwestern high schools. The authors quite rightly point to the unique nature of this study in the field of social studies in terms of both its size and its use of quantitative and qualitative data. The study that informed *The Political Classroom* drew on the voices of both teachers and students and, importantly, included efforts to gain insights on students' civic attitudes and behaviors *following* high school.

The reader will find below a summary of *The Political Classroom* that points to some of its significant insights and contributions and a final section that raises some important critiques of this work.

Summary

In this volume, the "political classroom" is one that draws students—as democratic citizens in formation—into the practice of

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deliberation around political issues that have at their core the question of "How should we live together?" This is a conception of the political that the authors distinguished from partisanship. It is in this murky intersection that the authors offered their view of what they called the "political education paradox" and its implications for civic education:

> *Simply put, it contrasts the need to provide students with a nonpartisan political education on the one hand with the need to prepare them to participate in the actual, highly partisan political community on the other. Part of the ethical challenge of teaching about politics is determining where political education ends and partisan proselytizing begins. (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 4)*

Grounded in the Deweyan conception of dialogue across difference, the authors advocated political classrooms based on the democratic values of equality, reason giving, and consideration of the effects of views and actions on others. This project was designed to identify and study high school social studies classrooms where the teachers are committed to including controversial issues and endeavor to bring students into deliberative consideration of those issues. As such, the authors drew on evidence from their extensive study of classroom discussions of controversial issues to address two broad questions: "(1) What did students experience and learn from these discussions? and (2) What effect do classrooms that engage young people in discussion of political controversy have on students' further political engagement and attitudes?" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 9)

Further, the authors were interested in the pedagogical decision-making processes engaged in by teachers along the way. The questions the authors posed in their study and the professional judgment framework they utilized to examine teacher practice provided significant insight into the behind-the-curtain aspects of the teaching dynamic. The authors asked:

1. How should teachers decide what to present as a controversial political issue?
2. How should teachers balance the tension between engaging students in authentic political controversies and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all students?
3. Should teachers withhold or disclose their views about the issues they introduce as controversial? (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 11)

Eschewing the notion of "hard and fast rules" that should direct teacher decisions, the authors drew on Dewey's understanding of what it means to reason about practice: "Dewey promoted a social and ethical theory that recognized the relationship between empirical inquiry (evidence), the constraints and affordances available in particular environments (context), and values (aims)" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 12). As such, the authors offered a framework for professional judgment—evidence, context, and aims—to help teachers sort through the complex array of classroom and curricular factors and, concomitantly, to help researchers sort through the complex array of data that comprise the research moment in classroom contexts.

As noted, *The Political Classroom* is a volume packed with revealing data and important philosophical explorations around civic education and behavior. The authors move adeptly from their broad research questions to the microdynamics of classroom encounters and back again. To aid in this complex interpretive dance, *The Political Classroom* begins with an important overview (chapter 1). Then, in part I, the authors (chapter 2) applied the framework for professional judgment by examining the social and political context that situated their study and its implications for the pedagogical and curricular decisions teachers made; (chapter 3) examined the evidence generated by the longitudinal study and offered analysis of the civic benefits of teaching students to engage in deliberation around controversial issues as well as the challenges presented by social inequalities that impact classroom dynamics; and (chapter 4) explored educational aims in the political classroom, including political equality, tolerance, autonomy, fairness, engagement, and political literacy. In part II, the authors presented three "cases" (chapters 5, 6, and 7) of political classrooms. Each case illuminates the role of educational aims in guiding teacher practice, the implications of context in shaping and prioritizing educational aims, the challenges in facilitating powerful classroom deliberation given class and racial dynamics and the political polarization in the broader culture, and the ethical challenges of selecting and framing political controversies for classroom use. In part III, the authors drew on the cases from part II to bring into relief the three complex and often divisive ethical questions the authors suggest teachers must grapple with as they draw students into classroom deliberation around controversial issues:

> *First, which issues should be framed as controversial political issues? Second, when and how should teachers address political issues that are sensitive to a minority of students in the classroom? And finally, should teachers share their political views with students? (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 81)*

Critique

The critiques I raise in regard to *The Political Classroom* rest less in what is said—included—by the authors than what is unsaid or ideologically elided. That is, this volume stands squarely in a liberal vision of democratic citizenship with a heavy emphasis on artifacts of participation. Indeed, *The Political Classroom* delivers on what is promised. However, there is little offered that extends the conversation into critical territory. To begin with the end in mind: Hess and McAvoy (2015) seek democratic citizens capable of deliberatively engaging controversial issues across political and social lines of difference. A more critical perspective suggests a democratic citizenry that examines and strategically responds to issues of power in ways that seek to alter status quo arrangements. The authors defined controversial issues as those issues that reflect or generate multiple (usually two) perspectives in classroom discussion. This frame serves hegemonic structures and discourses that perpetuate the undemocratic and antiintellectual elements of school culture (Gramsci, 1971). Framing controversial issues this way operates as a school version of CNN—two points of view easily positioned within dominant assumptions about what a good society is. This

approach is a natural in school contexts—microcosms of dominant society—that privilege individualism, choice, and (pseudo) civil dialogue. A more critical definition of controversy would be those issues that cannot be discussed in classroom contexts—or, at least, cannot be discussed outside the dominant discursive frame. I would argue that the civic disengagement that *The Political Classroom* is really speaking to—attempting to combat—comes from a curriculum that fails to accurately reflect to students the realities of current power structures. In other words, the world described in social studies classes must ring true to our young people, or they will cease to listen deeply or engage authentically. The cure is the disease—binary thinking, policy focus, contrived civility, ahistorical contexts, and limited participation in a terribly dysfunctional electoral system (Hyslop-Margison & Thayer, 2009).

In short, discussion in social studies classrooms about military intervention in Iran or immigration can—as the authors suggested—help students develop the skills of reason giving, deliberation, and even political empathy, as long as those discussions stay within the parameters of dominant discourse. What these discussions will not do, however, is help students come to a critical understanding of the role of power in shaping those conversations and in regulating the systems of control that perpetuate dominant forms of governance. So, what are some examples of controversial issues from this perspective? Imagine a social studies classroom discussion around not just the pros-or-cons ~~points~~ regarding intervention in Iran but around the historical and ongoing efforts of American empire and military dominance, including the clandestine and not so clandestine American role in antidemocratic destabilization strategies in Iran. Imagine a social studies classroom discussion that, rather than reproducing party platform statements on immigration about building a wall or allowing amnesty, actually problematizes the exploitive economic relations with Latin American nations and peoples.

The authors' emphasis on the significance of teachers' understanding of the contexts—social, cultural, and political conditions—that shape political discussion and deliberation in classrooms does not translate to their own analysis of context for this volume. While the authors pointed to the process of political polarization and growing inequality, there was no effort to connect those shifts to increased corporate power. There is a very brief reference to Citizens United but no analysis about its connection to an erosion of the democratic polity. There is no reference to the ongoing political effort to disenfranchise millions of our most marginalized citizens. These are contexts that should have a significant visibility in the wider political discussion of citizenship. In terms of school contexts, the authors do not address the roles of professional ideology or teacher ethos (Lortie, 1975) that favor institutional compliance as they move educators away from controversy. There was no discussion of the impact of standardized curriculum and a regime of testing and its influence on teachers' perceptions about what content (controversial issues) they can and cannot address in their courses. Finally, there is a deafening silence from the authors regarding the well-documented antidemocratic and anti-intellectual functions of a good deal of social studies curricula—perhaps best described as patriotic pabulum and, without question, miseducative (Chomsky, 2004).

Conclusion

The Political Classroom draws our analytical eye to a number of ideas and issues worth considering: the complexities of teacher judgment in selecting curriculum; the significance of inequalities or like-mindedness in inhibiting or silencing—or magnifying—classroom voices; and the importance of educational aims as teachers act with authenticity and deliberation in their efforts to draw students into dialogue over difficult issues. The strategies offered in *The Political Classroom* are necessary but not sufficient for the goal of critical democratic citizenship. The missing piece is serious engagement with structures, discourses, and artifacts of power—a deliberate step away from the Deweyan tradition of soft dissent, unable or unwilling to challenge the fundamentally antidemocratic and anti-intellectual foundations of a virulent capitalism. Without this piece, students are practicing ineffectual and hegemonic pseudo debate skills but not critical citizenship.

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