

# Letter from the Editors

---

**W**HEN WE BEGAN discussing the new direction for *Democracy & Education*, we repeatedly returned to the guiding notion of fostering critical *conversation*. Our new vision for the journal represents just that: a series of conversations about important educational ideas that simultaneously push us to think about the nature and substance of democratic education while doing so in ways that invite further conversation and critical engagement. Unfortunately, such conversations do not represent the norm found in our educational and political landscapes. Democratically minded, critical thought is besieged. In a recent speech at the University of Toronto at Scarborough, Noam Chomsky cited the corporatization of education as a culprit. “In a corporate-run culture,” he argues, “the traditional ideal of free and independent thought may be given lip service, but other values tend to rank higher” (Chomsky, 2011). The resulting educational culture is anathema to democratic inquiry that values “challenging perceived beliefs, exploring new horizons and forgetting external constraints.” We are proud that in *Democracy & Education*, the authors build upon a rich tradition of educational thought that sees the exchange of divergent perspectives as a fundamental task necessary for the development of vibrant educational institutions and cultures. As Amy Gutmann (1999) urges, we must resolve our educational problems in ways that remain compatible with our democratic values. As such, the authors in this journal do not necessarily agree with one another’s arguments and conclusions, but the forms of their disagreement align broadly with the democratic values their papers collaboratively explore.

In this issue, we find our authors engaging in two essential tasks: The first is to analyze how the dominant context of schooling is one that is assaulting the very notion of democratic schooling. Toward that aim, Laura DeSisto reviews Martha Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. In it, DeSisto engages with Nussbaum’s articulation of the “silent crisis”—the attack on liberal education—and Nussbaum’s arguments that the loss of the humanities may contribute to a world-wide crisis in education, and, ultimately, democratic life. Joe Onosko puts substance to Nussbaum and DeSisto’s fears in his article, “Race to the Top Leaves

Children and Future Citizens Behind: The Devastating Effects of Centralization, Standardization, and High Stakes Accountability.” His penetrating analysis of *Race to the Top* (RTT) chronicles the legislation’s roots and why it profoundly subverts democratic education. Engaging him in conversation, William Mathis argues that support for the reforms of RTT is not based upon scientific certainty. Instead, RTT advocates depend upon a “belief-dependent realism” in which they seek and offer evidence that matches their ideological beliefs.

Critiquing the neoliberal ideology that permeates schooling inspired by NCLB and RTT in his essay “Imagining No Child Left Behind Freed from Neoliberal Hijackers” Eugene Matusov offers an alternative vision of failure-free education grounded in sociocultural theory. He is joined in his efforts by both David W. Kritt and Herve Varenne. While Kritt agrees with much of Matusov’s critique of neoliberal schooling policies, he uses cultural historical activity theory to arrive at different conclusions about achievement and failure. Varenne also agrees with but complicates Matusov’s analysis by developing a further exploration of the ways that the label *neoliberal* does or does not capture the current ideologies and policies associated with contemporary educational challenges.

Our authors also engage in a second task, one that continues a long line of educational thought associated with defining the content and practices of democratic schooling. In “The Potential for Deliberative Democratic Civic Education,” Jarrod S. Hanson and Kenneth R. Howe explore how two different conceptions of democracy and associated notions of autonomy lead to different pedagogical approaches to civic education. They argue that deliberative democracy creates a desirable foundation upon which to build civics education. Walter Parker agrees with their analysis, especially the importance of political conversation within civics classrooms. He extends the ideas in their paper by offering a detailed exploration of how a particular model of classroom deliberation advances the democratic aims Hanson and Howe put forward.

Kurt Stemhagen shifts the focus from civics to the teaching of mathematics in “Democracy and School Math: Teachers’ Belief-Practice Tensions and the Problem of Empirical Research on Educational Aims.” Stemhagen’s empirical work explores the

relationships between math teachers' beliefs about democratic aims and the ways their teaching practices converge or diverge from them. In response, Kasi Allen applauds Stemhagen's work while also challenging him. Allen offers a detailed conceptualization of mathematics education and constructivist teaching practices and argues for a rethinking of mathematics education in service of democratic aims.

Kevin Roxas's "Creating Communities: Working with Refugee Students in Classrooms" initiates the final conversation. In it, Roxas analyzes the nature of community building with refugee students in public classrooms by focusing on the case of a middle school teacher and her students. He chronicles the challenges they faced and the ways they worked through them. In response, David Lee Keiser points out that Roxas's work demonstrates the impact of democratic education beyond classroom walls and has the potential to influence the lives of families and the local communities surrounding our schools.

Finally, Deborah Meier reviews Brian Schultz's edited volume, *Listening to and Learning from Students*. As have others in this volume of *Democracy & Education*, Meier argues that this text is important because it contributes to a vital conversation about what democratic education is and can be. "The danger in which democracy is now threatened by an ongoing eating away of its core message, requires us to take up these issues among our education students and colleagues (for whom this book is written) and also our K-12 students and their families."

We welcome you to this edition of *Democracy & Education*. We are delighted to have you join us in conversation.

## References

- Chomsky, N. (2011, August 5). Public education under massive corporate assault—who's next? [Transcript of speech delivered at University of Scarborough, Vermont]. *Alternet*. Retrieved from [http://www.alternet.org/education/151921/chomsky:\\_public\\_education\\_under\\_massive\\_corporate\\_assault\\_%E2%80%94\\_what%27s\\_next/](http://www.alternet.org/education/151921/chomsky:_public_education_under_massive_corporate_assault_%E2%80%94_what%27s_next/)
- Gutmann, A. (1999). *Democratic education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.