

Critical Democracy Audits

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Abstract

Educators frequently claim that the projects in which they are involved are democratic. However, considering the multiple and often conflicting notions of democracy and democratic education, are there any shared understandings of what either of those notions means? Does the claim that a project is democratic carry with it any shared assumptions, commitments, or obligations? In this response, I extend the conversation started by the authors of that article by proposing a critical democracy audit of their education project, and I offer a preliminary collection of questions, developed from recent literature on democratic education, that might be considered for use in such an audit.

This article is a response to:

C. Buxton, S. Kayumova, and M. Alleksaht-Snider. (2013). Teacher, Researcher, and Accountability Discourses: Creating Space for Democratic Science Teaching Practices in Middle Schools. *Democracy & Education*, 21(2). Article 2. Available online at <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/Iss2/2>.

IN THIS RESPONSE to “Teacher, Researcher, and Accountability Discourses: Creating Space for Democratic Science Teaching Practices in Middle Schools” (Buxton, Kayumova, & Alleksaht-Snider, 2013), I pose several sets of questions to interrogate the LISELL project the authors describe in their paper. The LISELL curriculum project claims a democratic goal—to increase ELL middle school students’ fluency in using scientific language and thereby promote their ultimate ability to participate in a democracy. However, in terms of democratic education practice, other aspects of the project are troubling. Reading “Teacher, Researcher and Accountability Discourses,” I was struck by elements of the authors’ curriculum project, professional development program, research report, and discourse analysis that seemed less than optimally democratic, especially with respect to the participation and representation of the middle school teachers involved.

My critique’s theoretical framework is an extension of Dewey’s (1916/1966) vision of education for democracy, as articulated by Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2007) in *Dewey’s Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform*. Within this extended vision, teachers—those who are called upon to educate youth for participation in a dynamic democratic society—enjoy abundant, authentic opportunities to participate as professionals, develop robust democratic skills, engage their students in democratic learning, and exercise agency and authority in their professional lives. This vision is aligned with views of

teachers as curriculum designers rather than mere curriculum users (Connelly & Clandinin, 1992; Craig, 2009). It is supported by Kincheloe, who argued in 1991 (and again in 2003), that teachers should engage in qualitative research as a path to empowerment. My theoretical position is aligned with those who resist the controlling and deskilling of teachers in a neoliberal age (e.g., Apple, 1988). My critique is offered in the spirit of Darling-Hammond’s summary of the new ideal:

moving beyond a world in which those who think and plan are separated from those who teach and do the work; they are working to understand schooling, teaching, and change by engaging in the work as well as by studying it and by creating collaboratives for democratic work and action. (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 15)

I call my proposed questions a critical democracy audit, modeled after democratic audits that have been designed to assess

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the extent and nature of countries' political democracy, such as the World Democracy Audit (Lindley, 2013). In addition to assessing the LISELL project and report, I invite readers to consider the value of using my questions and others to assess the democratic-ness of the work education researchers do in schools, especially the work we do with teachers. The first group of questions I pose is general. The sets that follow are more specific, and I shall introduce them in turn.

- When educators claim democracy and democratic education as our project, to what do we commit?
- When we discuss schooling and democratic society and their relationships to each other, do we assume shared understandings, or do we acknowledge and articulate our own understandings and how they may differ from those of others (Crowley & Apple, 2009, p. 450)?
- Do we commit to being reflective about the ways that a democratic project might breach democracy, even—or perhaps especially—as we preach it?
- May we call a project democratic if, in pursuing enhanced potential agency of one group, the agency of another might be diminished?
- Do we commit to explore the ways that university education researchers, who have greater freedom, autonomy, and status in schools than do classroom teachers, might use those advantages in the service of teachers?
- Do we commit to wrestle—and to continue to wrestle—with the complexities of navigating uneven and unequal power and authority when university education researchers work in schools?
- Do we commit to being sensitive to the extent to which some voices are heard and honored while others are discounted or ignored?
- Do we commit to conduct a democracy audit of the situations in which we engage with teachers, parents, and students—to assess the extent to which democratic principles are adhered to, democratic practices are followed, and democratic outcomes are assessed?

Professional Development Projects

Work undertaken as professional development for teachers might reasonably be expected to reflect democratic principles and practices. Rather than being performed on teachers, democratic teacher professional development would consult teachers about their needs, be designed and modified collaboratively, and engage teachers as professionals. The authors of “Teacher, Researcher, and Accountability Discourses” assert that “an education system grounded in democracy as process requires collective, creative, emergent, and participatory teacher learning practices where development of democratic decision making, not democratic results, is the goal” (Buxton et al., 2013, p. 1). The authors repeatedly refer to the collaborative nature of their curriculum project, for example, “codeveloping materials with teachers” (p. 2), with “subsequent collaborative work during the school year” (p. 2). Yet, it is the authors who, apparently without input or request from middle school teachers, “developed the LISELL project,

incorporating professional learning activities for teachers, curriculum and learning materials for teachers and students, meaningful assessments of student learning, and research about each of these aspects of the project” (p. 2).

A democracy audit of a teacher professional development project might ask the following questions:

- Are the goals and means of the project to increase the agency and democratic skills of teachers, students, and families?
- To what extent has the project emerged from ongoing conversations with teachers and their requests for a professional development partner (Vinz, 2006) ?
- Do all participants in the project negotiate authority by “working from shared purposes that were jointly constructed, understood, and shared” (Brubaker, 2012, p. 167) ?
- How have teachers codeveloped or otherwise contributed to the development of project materials and activities?
- To what extent are the project components based on the teachers’ knowledge of their classrooms and their students?
- What structures are provided to ensure that teachers are empowered and involved in the process of making decisions (Rainer & Guyton, 2001, p. 20) ?
- How are differences in power and status confronted and resolved among the various participants in the project?
- How is free, open, and honest communication maintained throughout the project?
- Are teachers’ reports of challenges in piloting activities or materials received and responded to respectfully (and with subsequent revisions to the activities or materials)?
- How do the professional developers use their resources in support of teacher agency?
- How do the professional developers model democratic teaching and learning in their work with teachers?
- Does the project provide a supportive community that encourages rethinking power and participation among teachers and teacher-educators and developers through opportunities to participate in democratic structures and processes? (Rainer & Guyton, 2001)
- How does the project position itself to honor, challenge, and combat the multiple constraints and pressures within and against which teachers must operate?
- Where teachers experience pressures from administrators or others in the adoption of curriculum materials, do the developers of those materials act as respectful mediators or negotiators between the teachers and the administrators?
- Does the project “cultivate the habits of connectedness (i.e., the multiple forms of reciprocity required to work together in a common space of difference) which will, in turn, create the spaces in which teachers have increased control over the course of their professional lives and the power to contribute meaningfully to the common good?” (Vinz, 2006, p. 11)

Research Projects

Education faculty members engage in research projects as part of their regular professional activity. These projects frequently take

place in schools and often involve the teachers and students who teach and learn there. Democratic education research projects should be expected to engage those teachers and students as coinquirers. Instead, the authors imply that their inquiry was initiated, designed, and pursued entirely by them, with the teachers serving as the objects of that inquiry. The authors write that they became interested in “how and why different teachers made decisions regarding implementation of the project practices in their classrooms” (Buxton et al., 2013, p. 2). Rather than engaging the middle school teachers in exploring their own decisions about using the LISELL project curriculum, these researchers seem to have done what they themselves alerted their audience to as a danger, which is to focus their research on teachers’ inability to “accept new practices wholeheartedly and then ‘correctly’ apply them to their instruction on a regular basis” (p. 1).

A democracy audit of an education research project might ask the following questions:

- Does the research project arise from the desires of all participants to understand each other better?
- Does the research design acknowledge teachers’ intense work situation, the fact that “teachers are held to local norms much more closely than professors,” and the “thousands of quick decisions” teachers make in the course of a school day (Gitlin & Russell, 1994, p. 183)?
- Is the research stance one of open and respectful inquiry into teacher practice that pays adequate attention “to school contexts . . . and how they bind and constrain what teachers are able to know and do” (Craig, 2010, p. 133)?
- Does the research design “encourage a dialogical process where participants negotiate meanings at the level of question posing, data collection, and analysis” (Gitlin & Russell, 1994, p. 185)?
- In what ways do researchers work to mediate our higher status as “experts—members of the education community who inform others, such as teachers, how to work within their classrooms” (Gitlin & Russell, 1994, p. 184)?
- To what extent does this research work to diminish the “great divide between those who regularly produce specialized forms of knowledge and those who are supposed to be informed by that knowledge” (Gitlin & Russell, 1994, p. 184)?
- What opportunities and motivation are researchers and teachers provided for each to work to understand the others’ perspectives, especially for the researchers to understand the teachers’ perspectives?
- Is the research designed so that the researchers can study, appreciate, and improve our understanding of participating teachers’ complex professional knowledge landscapes (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000)?
- Are observations of teacher practice ongoing and multifaceted, sensitive to temporality, sociality, and place and leading to embedded and multistoried understandings of teacher work (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007)?
- Is there space for teachers as participants in the research projects to “self-define, challenge the division of labor in research production, and challenge the primacy of academic

research through the situated production of knowledge” (Christianakis, 2008, p. 100)?

Research Reports

Researchers write reports of our work in which we describe our research projects and discuss our findings. Journals, including *Democracy & Education* publish these reports, sharing them with a larger community of scholars. What is written in those reports and how they are written communicate the relative status and perceived agency of those writing the reports and those about whom the reports are being written. The authors of “Teacher, Researcher, and Accountability Discourse” (Buxton et al., 2013) discuss the middle school teachers in their study:

- “Jessica is expressing the belief common among our project teachers that economically disadvantaged students have not had the same opportunities to engage in hands-on science experiences” (p. 6).
- Most of Henry’s initial conversations involve an expression of a deficit perspective about his students’ performance and skills (p. 6).
- The initial science teacher Discourse also resisted the idea that teaching language should be an expected part of middle school science teaching (p. 6).
- As teachers became part of the LISELL discourse community, they began to express their evolving thinking about classroom assessments as serving a purpose beyond just preparing students for end-of-year standardized tests (p. 7).

Statements like these contribute to a subtle yet pervasive portrayal in this report of the middle school teachers as not (yet) enlightened, and the researchers as those who would do the enlightening. If the teachers had been democratic participants in the construction of this research report, I would expect them to be represented (or, better yet, to represent themselves) as knowledgeable professionals navigating complicated and conflicting demands with awareness and skill.

A democracy audit of an education research report might ask the following questions:

- Does the research report avoid stances that disempower teachers, learners, or others?
- Are the teachers in the research report constructed as knowledgeable professionals, or are the teachers “constructed by what is lacking rather than the strengths and new perspectives they bring to a profession that is constantly in the making” and are their struggles interpreted as deficiencies or failures (Vinz, 2006, p. 9)?
- Do the report authors interrogate and explain their modes of perceiving data and expressing their meanings (Anzul, Downing, Ely, & Vinz, 1997)?
- Is the report narrative such that teacher participants reading it would feel that it captured adequately “the context of their personal and professional lives and . . . their realities” (Craig, 2010, p. 132)?

- Do researchers provide evidence that we have considered the forms of language that would “best do justice to the people who were participants” (Anzul et al., 1997, p. 37)?
- Do researchers report on our project in ways that are reflective and open or in ways that maintain an historic hierarchical divide between research experts and teaching practitioners?
- Have the discourse analysts taken pains that their “interpretations of what [the participants] mean are based on [the participants’] own social and cultural worlds,” rather than those of the analysts (Gee, 2005, p. x)?
- Do the discourse analysts demonstrate awareness that their punctuation and edits, the text they write around what they quote, and what and how they select to quote are interpretive acts that require serious examination of the data that they are shaping into meaning (Anzul et al., 1997, p. 32)?
- Is the analysis reflective and self-conscious, acknowledging that the researchers created the narrative, are listed as its authors, and have careers enhanced by its publication?
- Has the discourse analysis led to “better, deeper, and more humane interpretations” of the discourse and the participants (Gee, 2005, p. x)?

Discourse Analysis and Representation

In the course of our work, education researchers often analyze the discourse of teachers and students. Researchers have the power to choose whose and what speech is presented, as well as how the speech is framed. To exercise that power democratically is the responsibility of those performing the analyses. The authors of “Teacher, Researcher, and Accountability Discourses” include one teacher’s comments about her and her colleagues’ instructional choices:

We do [hands-on activities] with our kids because they don’t get the opportunity that a lot of people do. . . . This may be the first time they’ve dealt with magnets. When we do something with our kids, it’s the first time they’ve ever experienced them. . . . So they all went like, “OOHHH, what happens if you do this?” (Buxton et al., 2013, p. 6)

The authors use this comment as the basis for criticizing what they see as the teacher’s unenlightened and inaccurate view of her students and go on to describe their own “theory-driven and research-based beliefs that students from diverse backgrounds, including ELLs, bring multiple resources to a classroom that can assist in their science learning and enrich the education of their peers and teachers” (Buxton et al., 2013, p. 6). They continue, “To support their science learning, ELL students need to be engaged in disciplinary discourse that simultaneously supports the development of academic literacy and content knowledge” (p. 6). The language of the teachers that the authors include for analysis comes from informal reflections and interviews. In contrast, the researchers, who have conducted the analysis and authored the report, are able to craft carefully the language that represents them, which makes for a strikingly uneven playing field on which the teachers end up being portrayed as naive and having inferior knowledge while the researchers are able to present themselves articulately as having superior knowledge.

A democracy audit of a discourse analysis might ask the following questions:

- How is discourse apprehended in this context? Is there an attempt to understand what is above or within the language chosen for analysis?
- Did the analysts use power as a lens in determining which and whose speech to analyze, in analyzing the speech, and in presenting the results of the analysis?
- If researchers and teachers are coparticipants in the research, are the discourses of both of equal status, and are they analyzed with the same critical scrutiny?

Conclusion

The questions I assembled in this response are consonant with my own ideals for democratic education work. Although notions of democracy, education, democratic education, and education for democracy are variably understood and the understandings vigorously contested, the notions link to ideals to which those who call ourselves democratic educators aspire. While other questions would serve other ideals (and I hope readers will propose additional or different questions), the questions in this response offer one possible pathway for assessing teacher development projects, education research projects, and their reports for how—and how likely—they might promote, compromise, or problematize fidelity to democratic principles, the observance of democratic practices, and achievement of democratic education outcomes.

Discussing the role played by social foundations courses in developing democratically oriented teachers, O’Brien (2005), a teacher-educator, might have been speaking to the relationship between education researchers and the teachers whose work provides researchers with something to study. O’Brien alerts us to issues of power, agency, and the perception of expertise:

Can we re-conceive of expertise as being developed in collaborative work rather than something a select few bring to the table? To do so, we would have to believe that knowledge is distributed in the education community and does not reside solely in the heads of those considered to be experts. We who have been designated as experts must acknowledge that our own beliefs are only one of many realities. Further, we must accept that some (much?) “expert knowledge” is flawed, impractical, or imperfect. If the core of such belief is solid, the experience that flows from will have a much better chance of leaving spaces for teachers to move forward, creating their own paths to “best practice.”

We must stop trying to “save” our students and instead ask them, “What do you need? What do I have to offer that might be helpful to you?” This position argues for support being provided as needed in areas that teachers find most important. We can try to bridge the gap between the “ivory tower” and school settings by crossing the border from the land of expertise to a place where all are valued for what they

bring. This means we who have been identified as experts need to work beside teachers, as allies, as they take ownership of their teaching . . . We need to live principles of democracy, egalitarianism, and critical inquiry in our work with teachers if we are to have any hope of making teaching truly liberatory work. (p. 39–40)

O'Brien reminds us that, if education researchers aspire to promote democratic education, we must democratically engage in our work with teachers and students. We need to assess critically the extent to which our work represents democratic principles and practices. When those principles and practices are compromised, we should hold ourselves and each other accountable, and adjust accordingly.

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