

Book Review

Teaching for Democracy in an Age of Economic Disparity

(C. Wright-Maley & T. Davi, Editors)

New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017

ISBN 9781138933415 (hbk), 9781138933422(pbk), 9781315678603(ebk)

No of pages: 261, price: \$55.04

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As the title suggests, this edited book addresses the intersections between democratic education and economic inequality in the American society. The book is a collection of ideas, gleaned from the experience of the different authors who contributed to it. The collection focused on how the confluence of capitalism and education has problematized the current model of democratic education, on how teachers can confront disparity both economically and civically in classrooms, on how teachers can engage and empower students' civic action at all grade levels and on the use of social media for democratic engagement in schools. These ideas and the book are united by an overarching belief that teaching need to be transformed to focus on democracy and preparing democratic generations of students. In the introduction, the editors set the scene for the remainder of the volume and present the major theme - that preparing students to participate in democracy is one of the central charges of today's schools. By providing examples from the political, economic and educational literature, the editors remark that economic disparity undermines democracy and democratic education in America, which has negative consequences on equality in education. They provide a

preview of the different chapters (14 in total) through organizing them into four different parts.

Part One “Setting the Context” consists of three chapters and presents the current educational context and its intersections with economic philosophy. In chapter 1, Giroux stresses that democratic education is struggling under neoliberalism, whose reform efforts focus narrowly on high-stakes testing, traditional texts, and memorization drills where education is organized and administered by market-driven forces. Giroux criticises that stating that in this way students cannot be educated for democratic citizenship. Joseph and Nicholas further use the term ‘economic citizen’ in chapter 2 to discuss how the marketization of public schooling and the corporatization of the curriculum have created an environment necessary for individualistic, economically focused citizens to grow and flourish (p. 26). Chapter 3 offers the historical development of two predominant approaches to social studies education, ‘emancipatory’ and ‘pluralist’; two frameworks that can be used by teachers to approach issues of economic disparity. This Part provides the reader with valuable discussions on democracy in education and viewing schools as social, cultural, and economic sites that are inextricably tied to issues of control, power, and politics. Giroux’s idea of educators/teachers as intellectuals is a good example of democratic education. Though, Part One could have provided more information on how to build character, community, humanitarianism, values and democracy in young people.

Part Two “Confronting Economic Disparity” includes three chapters and provides examples from current practices and approaches used in some schools in America to confront economic inequality. In chapter 4, Rogers and Westheimer share the findings of their research with high school teachers in California regarding addressing economic inequality in their classrooms. In chapter 5, Tamara refers to her own experience of teaching social studies to grade 11 and 12 high school students about

framing economics and economic inequality. Chapter 6 reflects on how to teach students about the seminal topic of campaign finance, which has become a clarion call for many individuals and organizations across the political spectrum concerned with the influence of money in politics. Part Two appears to build on the ideas presented in Part One, as it looks at different ways of approaching democratic education in this neoliberal age. It shows how practising teachers can address economic inequality in their classrooms by engaging students in such discussions. Part Two could have benefitted from presenting ways of involving policy makers and teacher educators in discussions about democratic education and economic disparity.

Part Three “Building Space to Nurture Student Action” is the largest section in the book; it consists of five chapters/articles. It focuses on how teachers can think more concretely about democratic education and preparing teachers to engage and empower student civic action at all levels: primary, secondary and during preservice teacher education. Chapter 7 discusses empowering students in education through feminist pedagogy and gender equity. In chapter 8, Dolan and Kaufman present about helping preservice teachers recognize the necessity of developing strong literacy skills for communicating effectively as citizens in a democratic society. Chapter 9 describes an approach to empowering students to learn about social issues through the lens of homelessness where Colwell draws on Freire’s (1970) pedagogical problem-posing model. Chapter 10 explains how citizenship can be enhanced through the dynamics of ‘action civics’ by ways of positive youth development programmes which can engage students in community projects and leverage them into powerful opportunities for civic engagement (p.6). Chapter 11 highlights fostering youth voice where the authors Kornfield, Bass and Levy discuss the Mikva challenge; a non-partisan non-profit organization based in Chicago and seeks to develop the next generation of civic leaders through programmes that focus on electoral participation, policy-making and

community activism. Part Three and the previous one are useful contributions to the book through showing practical examples from American schools and how teachers can support promising civic practices to meaningfully engage students at different levels in civic actions. However, providing examples from other contexts could have strengthened Parts Two and Three more.

Part Four “New Fronts in the Fight for Democracy” includes three chapters/papers and sheds light on recent cultural developments by elucidating new possibilities that can invigorate sites of civic learning. In chapter 12, Arend and Cuenca present the tragedy of Mike Brown, an unarmed black teenager, who was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9th 2014. The authors discussed the lessons we can learn from this event in terms of imagining new possibilities for democratic engagement and expression. Chapter 13 describes the social justice approach to humanities 101 and discusses how an attention to narrative through liberal arts can open possibilities for democratic education and respond to the needs of the marginalized adults. The final chapter (14) presents how social media is changing our sense of democratic education, agency, and pedagogy. Part Four discusses a significant issue regarding the new possibilities available in the fight for democracy, such as the use of social media, which is a conundrum of modern life and is used extensively by new generations. Part Four could have provided practical examples of schools that have utilized social media appropriately for such purposes, or it could have offered detailed guidelines for using social media as a tool for activating democratic citizenship.

In general, this book has something to offer regarding teaching for democracy and educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens. Although it addressed very different challenges, one of this volume's most significant contributions to the field is its focus on economics and how it constrains democratic education through capitalism

and neoliberalism, which dominate America's political and social institutions. The book tackles crucial problems in American education and society, especially the current state of inequality. It explains how and why there is a need to utilize new approaches to democracy education for marginalized students in particular, with the intent of strengthening democracy for all (Pace, 2017). Therefore, this book can be a valuable resource for researchers, professionals and practitioners interested in democratic education and striving to make the world a better place, as well as for teachers hoping to teach for democracy and prepare generations of democratic students.

References:

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