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Democratic Citizenship Education: A New Imperative for the Americas

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Democratic Citizenship Education: A New Imperative for the Americas

Bradley A.U. Levinson

Indiana University, USA

Daniel Schugurensky

Ontario Institute of Studies in Education-University of Toronto, Canada

Roberto González

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

Presentation of the Inter-American Journal of Education for Democracy

I. Democratic Citizenship Education in the Americas

During the last decade, countries across the Americas have been active in revising programs for civic education in order to create a broader and deeper democratic political culture. Perennially a bulwark of national identity and allegiance for more authoritarian or populist regimes, civic education has been reconceived as a space for fostering democratic citizenship. Yet school-based civic education remains but one actor in the drama, variously competing and aligning with the many forces and influences that shape the construction of citizenship, from popular culture and the media, to peer groups and economic relations, to political opportunities and the balance of rights and responsibilities present in each particular context. In discourse across the Americas, civic education is giving way to “citizenship” education, and the broader term, “citizenship formation,” is often preferred, especially in the Spanish and Portuguese languages. In our usage, then, democratic citizenship education (DCE) includes state-sponsored initiatives in schools and in non-formal education programs, as well as informal socialization processes and organized civil society initiatives.

During the last decade, the Organization of American States (OAS) has also played an important role in the region promoting DCE. At least since the Second Summit of the Americas, held in Santiago de Chile in 1998, numerous mandates for attention to “democratic values and practices” have been promulgated during OAS general assemblies, plenary sessions, and Summits of the Americas. Such efforts were strongly bolstered by the signing of the Inter-American Democratic Charter of the OAS in September of 2001. Articles 26 and 27 of the Charter placed emphasis on the need to develop a “democratic culture” to accompany democratic political reforms. In particular, Article 27 mandated that “special attention shall be given to the development of programs and activities for the education of children and youth as a means of ensuring the continuance of democratic values, including liberty and social justice.” Since that time, the Department of Education and Culture, in collaboration with the Department for the Promotion of Governance of the OAS, has taken the lead in convening meetings with participants from governmental and non-governmental institutions throughout the Americas to share knowledge of best practices across borders and to exchange ideas through open discussions and debates.



Such groundwork resulted in the creation of the Inter-American Program on Education for Democratic Values and Practices in August of 2005. By mandate, the Inter-American Program consists of a variety of activities organized under three main areas: “research,” “professional development,” and “information exchange.” Each set of activities is designed to advance the agenda of education for democracy in the Americas. An advisory board for the Inter-American Program was selected, and the Board met for the first time in April of 2006, in Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia, with significant support from the Colombian Ministry of Education, to examine gaps in our knowledge and to develop recommendations for future initiatives. At this meeting, it was agreed that an independent peer-reviewed journal should be among the Program’s first academic contributions to education for democracy in the Americas--thus the idea of the *Inter-American Journal of Education for Democracy* was born.

In consultation with the OAS Department of Education and Culture, eventually three members of the Program’s research sub-committee agreed to launch and co-edit the first issues of the journal. This initial publication is possible thanks to generous support from the Permanent Mission of Colombia to the OAS, the Center for Civic Education, and the Inter-American Committee on Education. This has become a truly hemispheric, tri-lingual endeavor. The Journal is initially being produced at Indiana University, because that is where the lead editor (Bradley Levinson) and the editorial assistants (Carolina Luna, Ma. Carolina Casas) work, with support from the School of Education, The Center for Social Studies and International Education, and the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. Yet it is difficult to say exactly where the Journal is “located”: The web design and maintenance have been done in Chile, at the Psychology Department, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, under the guidance of co-editor Roberto González, and much of the translation has been carried out there, as well; meanwhile, the third member of the editorial team, Daniel Schugurensky, carries out his duties from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, of the University of Toronto, Canada. The Editorial Board for the Journal consists of scholars from across the Americas. Moreover, the three editors represent different academic traditions and international experiences. Levinson was trained as an anthropologist in the United States, but has spent most of his career studying education in Mexico and Latin America, where he acquired Spanish fluency; González is a social psychologist at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, with significant training and research experience on tolerance, intergroup relations, social identity and prejudice reduction in Chile and European countries; and Schugurensky is a scholar of adult and higher education, a native Argentinean who spent many years living and working in Mexico before moving to Canada to pursue graduate studies, and who has also worked in Brazil and other Latin American countries. Among the three of us, we hope to represent a wide array of views and approaches. Of course, we are only here for a short time, anyway. The Journal is conceived as a cooperative endeavor, and thus before long we will initiate the search for new editors to carry the Journal beyond its first two years.

At the initial Advisory Board meeting of the Inter-American program, there was vigorous discussion about just what comprised “education for democratic values and practices.” In addition to the programs and activities that explicitly aim to “form democratic citizens,” it was clear that a number of related educational programs that went by different names ought to also be considered as part of education for democracy. Among these would be included human rights education; peace and conflict resolution education; intercultural and anti-racist education; environmental education; global education; and education for gender awareness and equity. Affectionately, we began to refer to programs with such emphases as the *cousins (primos)* of education for



democracy. Indeed, depending on their focus and conceptual framework, such programs and their themes ought to be seen as constituent members of a family of democratic citizenship approaches. Our Journal, then, recognizes and honors a broad array of programs and activities that comprise the field of Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE). The articles in this first issue manifest such a broad vision: from an assessment of a school-based program to reduce anti-social behavior and bullying in Colombian classrooms (Ramos, Nieto, and Chau), to a discussion of media debates and street protests as educational factors in the construction of “environmental citizenship” in Mexico (Tapia), to a conceptual discussion of citizenship education from Argentina (Onetto), to an ethnographic analysis of how arts-based programs construct “civic subjects” in Canada (McGregor), to a dialogue on the legacy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire for education and democracy (Vittoria and Freire).

II. Formats and Key Questions for the Journal

As we state in our calls for papers and our guidelines for writers, the goal of the Journal is to foster intellectual discussion, disseminate research findings, and exchange ideas to promote education for democratic citizenship across the Americas. We invite research-based or conceptual articles that advance the discussion about education for democracy. Priority is given to authors and topics from countries of the Americas, although articles that address experiences in other nations are accepted if they are illustrative and contribute to current debate on issues in the Americas. The publication is a plural forum that diffuses knowledge on a wide array of topics, disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and methodologies in the field of citizenship education for democracy.

For the first two years, the journal will be published exclusively online, and after that we will consider the possibility of adding a printed version as well. For the time being, the journal is organized in three main sections: short essays, full research articles, and dialogues. In the future we are considering the creation of new sections, such as “learning from other regions,” to publish invited works from beyond the Americas which have relevance to the debates on education for democracy in our continent. In order to promote further discussion of the published articles, the web page of the journal will also include a special section to make comments. The basic assumption is that the readers will thereby have the opportunity to expand the value of the articles by providing thoughts and ideas for further research.

Within the parameters of a rigorous, peer-reviewed journal, our aim is to remain open to new currents of scholarship and thought in the field of democratic citizenship education. However, in order to initially map out the field and stimulate further knowledge production and research ideas, we have identified four major topics, or themes, within which several questions and concerns are proposed. These broad themes cover most aspects of DCE: 1) The organizational, juridical, and institutional landscape of DCE; 2) The key values and contested meanings of democratic citizenship; 3) Pedagogy, school governance, and curriculum; and 4) Evaluation of programs and the challenge of practice. We address each of them in the following sections.

The Organizational, Juridical, and Institutional Landscape of DCE

Both in terms of funding and infrastructure, the field of DCE is growing rapidly. International organizations, national ministries, and local social movements all play an important role. Any attempt to understand the



burgeoning phenomenon of DCE across the Americas must reckon with the following questions: What is the prevailing political and social climate in which certain kinds of programs and policies are being promoted and developed? What are the major organizations sponsoring democracy education, and how do they work? Who funds them? What are their ideological inclinations? What laws and policy statements are driving these programs? Finally, what role do government agencies, especially ministries of education, play in developing and implementing these programs, and what role do various non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—local, national, and international—play? What kinds of collaborations or relationships, if any, exist between these different sectors?

Values and Meanings of Democratic Citizenship Education

In recent years, a broad hemispheric commitment to DCE has been achieved. In virtually all DCE discourses and programs, there is substantial agreement about the need to supplement electoral democratization with deeper and broader democracies, and with more robust and far-reaching cultural changes. Policymakers often see education—more specifically, schooling—as the most effective way to bring about such change. There is also broad agreement that such education cannot rely on the timeworn accumulation of encyclopedic knowledge that characterized the “old” civic education. Rather, DCE necessarily involves the creation of new values, dispositions, skills, knowledge, and practices. It is not surprising, then, that terms like values, ethics, norms, opinion formation, and competencies figure prominently in DCE programs. Such programs seek to instill deep commitments to democracy in which core values and knowledge undergird reflective action.

Where the DCE programs sometimes differ is in the values they highlight and the competencies they seek to develop. Some place emphasis on deliberative conceptions of democracy, others rule-of-law, others participatory democracy, and so forth. And in cases where the rhetoric would seem to be similar—such as the ubiquitous reference to *participation*—the meanings can be quite different as well. So when we examine particular DCE programs and practices, we must ask: How is “democracy” implicitly or explicitly defined and conceived? What kinds of knowledge, competencies, values, attitudes or dispositions are highlighted, and why? Finally, what role does the political/social context play, in which certain values and competencies are highlighted over others?

Pedagogy, School Governance, and Curriculum (Transversalidad)

In the past, much civic education reform concentrated on the curriculum and the formal knowledge it represents. Now across the Americas we see the clear ascendance of programs that move beyond curricular reform to attempt a change in teachers’ practices and the culture of schools. We need to study the actual design of new programs for DCE to explore the way they propose to use schools and other educational sites to construct democratic citizenship: How is the teacher’s role, and the teacher’s pedagogical approach, being redefined in DCE programs? How are relationships—between and amongst teachers, students, and administrators—being reconsidered as an essential component of education for democracy? To what extent is the democratization of school governance conceived as an essential part of DCE? In general terms, how much is the form of teaching and learning, the texture of school life, being considered as essential to DCE as the textbooks and curriculum?



After implementing new DCE pedagogy and curriculum, several questions are in order, particularly those regarding the main outcomes of such reform. Indeed, research should benefit a lot by focusing attention on both the contextual (e.g., school norms, teacher motivation, parental norms, etc.) as well as the individual outcomes (social attitudes, values, motivation, and behavioral change of students). Questions regarding the underlying factors that might explain attitude change and social democratic learning processes are very welcome. Better democratic citizens are typically characterized as tolerant, reflexive, and committed to their personal as well as collective goals, among other characteristics. Present and future research might contribute significantly to this field by measuring and modeling all those outcomes.

Evaluation of Programs and the Challenge of Practice

Given the paucity of rigorous evaluation and empirical evidence, we ask whether high-sounding programs translate into actual changes in the bureaucratic, hierarchical legacy of schooling across the Americas, or in the actual knowledge, values, and attitudes acquired by students. There is a great need to share the results of those rigorous studies that have been conducted, and to generate knowledge about “best practices” for possible transfer to other school settings or contexts across different countries in the Americas. How can we best design and assess the effectiveness of new programs in DCE (a methodological question)? What elements of these programs seem most or least effective, and why? What seem to be the greatest sources of, or obstacles to, their success? And what are the challenges and drawbacks of “transferring” DCE models and practices from one context to another?

III. Contributions of the First Issue

For our first issue, we have assembled a set of papers that represent a broad array of academic disciplines, and raise a striking number of different issues in the study of education for democracy. We are also pleased to note that the papers and authors represent a diverse geographic sample: from the top of the Americas (Canada—McGregor) to the bottom (Argentina—Onetto), with Mexico (Tapia), Colombia (Ramos et al.), and Brazil (Vittoria and Araújo Freire) in between. Finally, as we have said, in the Inter-American Program on Education for Democratic Values and Practices, there is ample recognition of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of forming democratic citizens. Schools are only one part of the broad educational ecology that forms democratic values and practices, just as democratic citizenship education” is only one explicit type of educational intervention, along with its aforementioned “cousins.” The papers in this first issue reflect such a multiplicity of views and approaches.

In the opening critical essay, the Argentine educator Fernando Onetto challenges us to set aside our pre-fixed ideas of democracy and develop educational initiatives that are fully commensurate with the historically specific and contingent forms that democracy may take. Drawing on a range of democratic theorists, from Aristotle to Claude Lefort, Onetto argues for a guiding principle of “reflexive accompaniment” to infuse all efforts in education for democracy. According to Onetto, the prevailing approaches to citizenship education, which he calls categorical and instrumental, suffer from various defects and limitations. They are inadequately adapted to the emergent qualities of democracy. Only reflexive accompaniment allows for the fullness and specificity of local identities and histories to become part of the open-ended narrative of democracy. Importantly, Onetto



argues that the making of education policy must itself become more democratically attuned, more dialogical vis-à-vis the various constituencies for whom policy is being constructed. Currently serving as the director of a major national program for democracy education in Argentina called *Convivencia Escolar*, Onetto provides us with a glimpse of how a large, state-initiated program can still adapt itself to local contexts. He also leaves us with a number of penetrating questions for further reflection and research.

Colombian psychologists Cecilia Ramos, Ana María Nieto, and Enrique Chaux share their first-year evaluation of an extremely promising program for democratic peace education and conflict resolution in Colombia: *Aulas en Paz* (Classrooms in Peace). This program consists of numerous dimensions, including curriculum intervention (school-based lessons and discussions for developing citizenship competencies), workshops with teachers and parents, and family home visits and phone calls with select parents. The authors show us how important this multi-dimensional approach is. Citing similar approaches in other parts of the world, they give us a close look at how the *Aulas en Paz* program appears to be achieving success in developing pro-social behavior amongst a group of second-grade schoolchildren. The authors are careful to point out some of the limitations of their study in terms of objectivity and generalizability, but they also report to us the development of a much more ambitious study of the same program, which in the future promises to document more fully, and pinpoint more precisely, its successes and failures.

The article by the Mexican researcher, Medardo Tapia Uribe, explores the dynamics of public sphere debate over environmental deterioration in the Mexican state of Morelos. Tapia's article has the signal benefit of centering environmental debate as part of education for democracy, and indicating environmental sustainability as a key democratic value for the future. Since environmental problems have become increasingly pressing around the world, and increasingly challenging for the health of democratic life, we cannot afford to consider education for democracy apart from environmental education. The study conducted by Tapia and his colleagues was creatively multi-dimensional. By using a number of different data sources, such as articles and letters in local newspapers, interviews, and surveys of secondary-level teachers and students, Tapia attempts nothing less than the social reconstruction of a regional environmental debate. Importantly, Tapia considers the media an important educational actor, to be considered alongside schools and other educative institutions. The media, as he says, are not just informative, but also **formative**. Together, such forces can be seen to constitute the "citizens' construction" of a new concept of environmental sustainability. Drawing on the work of the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Tapia helps develop a theoretical framework for understanding the interplay of political discourse for citizenship between governmental and non-governmental agencies.

The article by the Canadian educational researcher, Catherine McGregor, brings to our attention the possibility of constructing democratic "subjectivities" through arts-based curriculum like photography and theatre. McGregor's concepts of "subjectivities" and "agency" draw on an important body of socio-cultural theory that is distinct from the psychological theory employed by Ramos et al.. Yet we see some interesting resonances between McGregor's concept of civic agency and subjectivity, on the one hand, and Ramos et al.'s concept of "citizenship competencies" for peaceful co-existence. Both are tracing the potential effects of different kinds of educational intervention that attempt to transform citizenship behaviors and attitudes. Ramos et al. wish to develop citizenship competencies for "peaceful coexistence," surely an important aspect of any democratic society. McGregor, on the other hand, is concerned to develop participatory agency—the



sense that youth can intervene in public life and make a difference. Working in a couple of different urban sites for “marginalized” youth, McGregor shows us how photography and theatre projects can be used to engage and unleash their participatory energies. Youth that had been previously disinterested in public affairs now display enormous commitment and originality in the way they can participate in such affairs. Thus, in addition to the important theoretical and methodological tools that McGregor shares with us, the author provides us with a hopeful glimpse into new educational methods for developing “civic agency.”

Finally, we publish here an insightful dialogue between Brazilian researcher Paolo Vittoria and professor Ana Maria (Nita) Araujo Freire, the widow of the late Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1921-1997). Ten years after Paulo Freire’s death, it is an appropriate time to reflect on his legacy and to reimagine his contributions in the context of the 21st century. With this purpose in mind, in this dialogue Paolo Vittoria and Nita Freire discuss the connections between a Freirean-inspired citizenship education and participatory democracy, on the one hand, and between conscientization and humanization, on the other.

With this stimulating and wide-ranging set of papers, we are very pleased to present to you the first issue of the *Inter-American Journal of Education for Democracy*. We are already hard at work on the second and future issues as well, which we aim to publish in 2008. Let us hear from you at ried@indiana.edu. May a million discussions bloom!