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Educators and education for democracy: Moving beyond "thin" democracy

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Abstract

Do our educational systems encourage, support, and cultivate a democratic experience for students? The debate over democracy in education could be characterized in terms of representative versus participatory democracy, with the former highlighting electoral processes (*thin*), and the latter focusing on critical engagement and social justice (*thick*). This paper reports on a study of College of Education students in the United States of America, highlighting three themes: 1) the predisposition among university students to understand democracy and politics in a *thin* way; 2) the potential for university teachers to *do* democracy in education; and 3) the importance of understanding power and difference in relation to democracy. The research leads to the development of a framework for conceptualizing democracy in education, highlighting, in particular, what educators can do to become more critically aware and engaged.

Introduction

What is democracy, how do we understand it, and how is it taught in schools? This question, which contains three separate but inextricably connected components, is pivotal for a number of reasons. Democracy is increasingly salient because of obvious international and trans-national phenomena, such as wars and military conflicts, a heightened awareness of the impact of environmental degradation, a globalization that has not borne fruit in terms of an improved standard of living for vast sectors of society across the globe, and the fundamental question of human rights (McLaren, 2007). Meanwhile, with the obvious connections and inter-linkages between what happens internationally and the resultant impact locally (Hoffman, 2006), it is important to interrogate what is taught, learned, and experienced in schools. Do our educational systems encourage, support, and cultivate a democratic experience for students (Banks et al., 2005; CIRCLE, 2003)? How are students engaged in democracy in a critical way throughout their formative years of education (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)?

The neo-liberal focus on the market-place has effectively pushed the debate around social justice in democracy to the periphery (Hill, 2003). In the light of neo-liberalism, which places a premium on economic transactions, privatization, and decreasing public support for key social institutions such as education,[1] what can be achieved in schools that aims to effectively challenge the inequitable power relations that serve to marginalize and disenfranchise, arguably, the

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majority of people (Portelli & Solomon, 2001; Torres, 2005)? Ultimately, the question of political literacy—especially, the ability to discern inequitable power relations—becomes key in understanding the linkage between education and democracy (Schugurensky, 2000; 2003; Freire, 1970). The possibility of critical pedagogy, which emphasizes political engagement and the salience of the social context and experience, as a means to achieving political literacy is thus presented in this paper as a significant factor in understanding the role of democracy in education (Freire, 1970, 1998; McLaren, 2007; Wink, 2005; Kincheloe & Weil, 2004).

Discussions on democracy often result in platitudinous affirmations that it is naturally desirable, and, as a corollary, anything that is not democratic is considered virtually irrelevant. Yet, it is apparent that there is no one universal definition of democracy (Karumanchery and Portelli, 2005), and, further, that many people have only a superficial conceptualization of what democracy is or should be (Gandin & Apple, 2005). Thus, the notion of *thin* as opposed to *thick* democracy allows us to conceptualize the visible tension between the superficial features often associated with democracy and the fundamental scaffolding which, on the other hand, permits people to appropriate the deeper meaning of the term (Gandin & Apple, 2005).[2] The debate could also be characterized in terms of representative versus participatory democracy, with the former highlighting electoral processes (*thin*), and the latter focusing on critical engagement and social justice (*thick*). Therefore, an examination of democracy in education should incorporate the educational context, especially given the neo-liberal architecture framing most contemporary education reforms (Torres, 2005). As Karumanchery and Portelli (2005) point out, globalization, despite the typical "meta-narrative," is neither apolitical (neutral) nor equitable, and it is highly questionable as to how the human dimension is appropriately reflected in the marketization of education.

This paper reports on a study of College of Education students in a university in the Mid-West of the United States of America. Three themes are highlighted in this research: 1) the predisposition among university students to understand democracy and politics in a *thin* way; 2) the potential for university teachers to *do* democracy in education; and 3) the importance of understanding power and difference in relation to democracy. In a previous paper (Carr, 2007), I outlined and critiqued how participants in this study understood democracy at the societal, political, and educational levels. I also attempted to make the case for active engagement in democratic education. In this paper, I extend the research by developing a framework for conceptualizing democracy in education, highlighting, in particular, what educators can do to become more critically aware and engaged. This paper also pays greater attention to the notion of how to *do* democracy, and how it is inextricably linked to a political and cultural interpretation of citizenship.

The present research, therefore, attempts to gauge how educators (graduate students)[3] and future teachers (undergraduate students) are engaged in democracy in education. The focus is on the role that critical pedagogy can play in making education and the educational experience more democratic. To this end, it is important to highlight the distinction between what democracy looks like, in the minds of research participants, and what it could look like in a more political and critical pedagogical framework. As Stevick and Levinson (2007, p.6) argue, "A focus on culture also allows a shift from such norm-laden questions as 'Is this teaching practice effective?' to the more interpretive question 'What does this practice mean to the people engaged in it'." In sum, while critically assessing the views and experiences of participants in this study, a critical pedagogical approach, moving beyond a norm-laden analysis of how they might be or are not supportive of democracy, will be used to suggest strategies, concepts, and issues that could inform a framework aimed at cultivating *thick* democracy.

Stevick and Levinson (2007) summarize the cultural dimension of the quest for democracy in education as follows:

> Democracy is not an abstract system that can be dropped into any new context and be expected to function, nor is it a set of institutional arrangements that can be evaluated satisfactorily simply by examining a flowchart in a document. Democracy is rather the product of interaction, the interaction of a system and its institutions with the cultural context and the people who make them real. Institutions and practices are infused with culture. And so are schools, educational practices, and the debates that surround them (p. 2).

At a time when patriotism appears to have usurped critical engagement (Westheimer, 2006) as the key feature in teaching about and for democracy, it is interesting to underscore that few studies have been undertaken on the ideology, positionality, and predisposition of those who are charged with the task of framing the democracy agenda in schools. Some important conceptual work, however, has been undertaken by Parker (2003), Avery (2002; 2003), and Banks et al. (2005), as well as some pioneering empirical work from a comparative vantage-point (Torney-Purta, Kland Richardson, & Henry Barber, 2005; Torney-Purta, & Vermeer, 2004), which seeks to identify and propose strategies for enhancing civic knowledge and engagement. There is a large body of scholarship on citizenship and citizenship education (e.g. Sears & Hughes, 2006) which incorporates, to varying degrees, some of the central tenets forming the foundation of democracy in education and democratic education, but there is still a need to explore the political dimension of critical engagement and pedagogy of those who teach in schools in relation to their attachment to democracy (Parker, 2003; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

A general hypothesis for this paper, then, is that progressive, critical democratic education work in classrooms and schools, along with the resultant experience for the students, will be greatly diminished if teachers have a weak or disaffected attachment to democracy themselves. While there are numerous factors involved in the formulation and framing of democracy in schools, clearly educators have an important role to play in cultivating and shaping the educational experience for students in relation to their present and future attitudes, behaviors, ideologies and engagement regarding democracy. The stress on political literacy and critical learning is, therefore, a key focus of the discussion.

Methodology for the study

The research presented in this paper seeks to add layers to the complex and nuanced nature of how educators experience, approach, and perceive democracy in education. The findings presented herein deal specifically with a sample of College of Education students at a university in the mid-Western United States. Serving a primarily White student population from the suburbs of a large urban area, who are commuters, the university is located in a largely African-American urban core. Only about 15% of the students are African-American, with the ratio decreasing to roughly 10% for the College of Education. Most of the students are from the immediate regional area, and there are only approximately 150 international students out of a total of 13,000. The majority of students are from working-class backgrounds, and are the first in their families to attend university. Approximately 90% of the students are enrolled in undergraduate programs.

The College of Education has approximately 1,300 students, who must complete four years of study, including practice-teaching and certification exams. The College follows guidelines produced by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education

(NCATE), which also accredits the College. It is important to emphasize that this College of Education is not unlike others in the US in that the prescribed number of courses, practicum, entry- and exit-exams and general framing of the undergraduate program does not, generally speaking, have a particular focus on social justice or a critical understanding of and engagement with democracy. Although reference is made to *diversity*, as prescribed by NCATE standards, and it is dealt with, to varying degrees, in two of the 20 required undergraduate courses, there is ongoing concern within the College that meaningful, sustained engagement with diversity, not to mention social justice, may not be receiving the attention it requires.[4]

The research instrument for this study is a detailed questionnaire containing approximately 25 questions, which was distributed to approximately 400 students in late 2005 (see Carr, 2007, for the survey instrument). The questions solicited Likert scale quantitative responses as well as open-ended qualitative responses. This paper discusses only the qualitative analysis. The questionnaire did not define such terms as democracy, citizenship, and social justice to participants but, rather, asked them to do so. The aim was to ascertain the perceptions, experiences, and perspectives of participants in relation to democracy without judging the level of sophistication they demonstrate through their responses.

The research sample included 129 students, for the most part undergraduates, twice as many females as males, the majority of whom were under 22 years of age, and only a small number of whom were not White. In order to succinctly describe and accurately associate narrative comments to participants, the following system is employed: a number for each participant (up to 129), followed by the level of education (undergraduate [U] or graduate [G]), the gender ([M] and [F]), followed by a racial origin identifier (White [W], African-American [A], and other [O]), followed by the age (under 22 [1], 22-25 [2], 26-30 [3], 31-40 [4], 41-50 [5], and 51+ [6]). For instance, (81/U/F/W/1) would represent participant 81, who is an undergraduate, White female, under 22 years of age.

As outlined by Merriam (1988), I developed a theoretical framework for the study by seeking to identify gaps in the knowledge base, develop new knowledge, and focus the orientation of my specific research approach. In probing the literature, I discovered that political literacy and engagement on the part of educators has not been fully explored, yet it may lead to important insight as to how democracy and democratic education can be taught. Although the sample group—College of Education students at this particular university—were not obliged to participate in the study, there is a purposeful element to the methodology since the sample was already limited or focused (Merriam, 1998, pp.61-62). The construction of the questionnaire was pilot-tested among a small group of College of Education colleagues and students to verify the comprehension level and validity of the questions. I sought to avoid double-barreled questions and terminology that could cause confusion, while also introducing a sequence of questions that would allow respondents to overlap, re-affirm and, in some cases, contradict their previous responses, which ultimately strengthened the analysis of data (Merriam, 1998; Berg, 2007). In cases where participants seemed unsure or less unequivocal in their answers, I noted the potential ambivalence, and sought to test the strength of these assertions through the responses provided by others.

Upon receiving completed questionnaires, all responses—quantitative and qualitative—were inputted into Excel software. The data-analysis phase included reviewing the quantitative scores for each question, then breaking down the scores based on gender, age, race and status (undergraduate or graduate). From this point, all of the narrative answers for the open-ended survey questions were read with a view to coding and triangulating some of the more salient themes that

developed. In complementing Berg's (2007) approach to triangulation, I reviewed narrative answers to diverse questions, seeking to make linkages to certain themes. A theme gained salience based on the number and intensity of how respondents elucidated points that could be subsumed in a particular category. Throughout the content analysis, I tested responses to determine how they fit in relation to my research questions and the theoretical framework presented in the first section of the paper.

Research findings

This research raises a number of concerns about, and opportunities for, democratic education and education for democracy. It is necessary to caution that this particular study refers to a specific context (the university in question), and that there are inherent limitations to any generalizations that can be made as a result. However, it is noteworthy that other studies (CIRCLE, 2003) have highlighted national problems the teaching of and about democracy that are not incompatible with the problems identified here[5].

Each of the main research themes previously introduced is explored below, illustrated, in some cases, by narrative comments from research participants along with an interpretive analysis. Elsewhere (Carr, 2007), I have provided a broader selection of participant comments, thereby allowing this paper to be more critically focused on analyzing the salience of key responses, along with developing an interpretation and model to contextualize the relationship student-educators have with democracy.

Theme One: 'Thin' democracy

Voting seems to occupy a larger space in the cultural landscape of the US than in other countries, especially given the popularity of such expressions that succinctly decry that "if you don't vote, you have no right to complain."

> Sometimes I vote, but I pay very little attention to politics. (86/U/M/W/3)

> The only active role I play in democracy is that I agree with their ideas and I vote-however I don't go to conventions or listen to speakers on this topic. (44/U/F/W/2)

> The only time I am engaged in democracy is when I vote on Election Day. Other than that day, I don't pay much attention to politics. (74/U/M/W/1)

> I vote, but outside of that I just stay informed. (108/U/F/W/1)

Yet, the US is the country where voter participation rates seem to be exceptionally low among developed countries (Cook, 2004). Although many participants viewed elections as a pivotal part of politics, government, and democracy, it is clear that a large number also understand elections to be the cornerstone, the fundamental piece defining democracy.

> High school prepared me to do the right thing, to vote and to work hard. (14/U/F/W/1)

> My high school taught me the responsibilities of being a good citizen. The best way to be a good citizen is to vote every 4 years for the person we believe would be better for this country. (74/U/M/W/1)

> We read books on the constitution and rules about the flag. But basically we were mostly encouraged to vote. (126/U/F/W/1)

As some studies (CIRCLE, 2003) indicate that students are more engaged now than in the past, while concurrently being more alienated from the formal electoral system, the above comments seem to be compatible with the tendencies of young people

in North America. Although voting in and of itself is a weak indicator of democratic engagement, it is relevant to enquire into the impact of the attitudes exemplified above in relation to future teaching responsibilities. Will current and future educators be committed advocates in teaching about formal democratic processes, structures, concepts, and issues if they are somewhat disconnected from, or ambivalent about formal democracy?

Many respondents highlighted their ambivalence about politics, which raises questions about how they interpret the concept, as well as how it is discussed in schools. As outlined earlier in this paper, education is a political enterprise (McLaren, 2007), and, therefore, educators should be prepared to facilitate debate on political issues in the classroom (Agostinone-Wilson, 2005). Deliberative democracy is an important skill, concept, and disposition that needs to be cultivated.

Another key thread that emerges in defining the comportment and experience of participants in the study is that there is, for a significant number, a reluctance to be engaged with democracy and politics, on the one hand, and an even more central feeling of disenfranchisement and apathy, on the other (Gandin & Apple, 2005).

> I watch news but never really pay attention. (37/U/F/W/1)

> I'm not too involved. I'm not a huge fan of politics. (41/U/F/W/1)

> I could be more active by voicing my concerns, but I don't have time for that. (17U/F/W/1)

This sentiment would clearly make it difficult to develop critical democratic engagement lessons, activities, and programs in and for the classroom (Banks et al., 2005). But what is behind these sentiments? Is there an expression of social class alienation from the broader, macro-level decisions that seem to be made in spite of visible public alienation? The disinterest among future and current teachers is disconcerting because this only serves to reinforce the perception that education is, or rather should be, apolitical. Agostinone-Wilson (2005) discusses the "threat of neutrality" in education, emphasizing that teacher-education programs need to address directly and indirectly, in an infused manner, a range of concepts, approaches, and perspectives that collectively serve to reinforce critical dialogue. This disinterest in politics can ultimately reveal a reluctance and resistance to dealing with pivotal democratic issues of power, identity, and social justice; such disinterest, ultimately can orient itself nicely to the drum-beat of patriotism.

Theme Two: The potential to 'do' democracy in education

For many of the participants, their formal school experience had only a limited, if any, influence on the democratic character of their attitudes. With reflection and critical analysis, it is possible that participants might re-evaluate their educational experience in a more positive light over time, but it would appear that the youth of the participants in this research confirms that such a process has not yet been undertaken (Parker, 2003). Meanwhile, the university experience, it is hoped, will help participants raise important issues related to social justice and democracy so that their future teaching will more fully and effectively accommodate the myriad issues and concerns therein (Torney-Purta, Kland Richardson, & Henry Barber, 2005).

The educational experience of current and future teachers is extremely important, owing to the numerous trickle-down ripples that will occur with their students in the classroom. Torney-Purta, Kland Richardson, & Henry Barber, 2005, in their pioneering international study on teachers' educational experience and confidence in relation to students' civic knowledge, found that:

> The context of a country, both the history of its political system and the extent to which teachers' preparation is consistent with the beliefs of the public and curricular policies governing education, are important components defining the effectiveness of educational programmes designed to raise teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (as well as their confidence in teaching about civic-related topics) (p. 49).

Therefore, a more explicit approach to teaching democratic education (Banks et al, 2005), especially one that takes on the social justice debate, would be beneficial for both the teachers and the students. Unquestionably, there is concern about tackling controversial topics but this, as well, can be cultivated and learned so as to be beneficial to the students (Hess, 2004; Parker 2003). Through the learning process, students can become engaged in debating controversial and contentious issues.

When asked about democracy and the democratic experience during their own elementary and secondary education, a common theme that emerged is that participants felt that the teachers themselves served to undermine and/or dampen efforts to be democratically engaged. This could be significant in determining the later development and appreciation that College of Education students have for *doing* democracy in education. In other words, if they did not experience meaningful democracy in education, they might consider it peripheral to the content of the curriculum, which might also include the viewpoint that education, is not intended to be about citizenship, social justice, and making linkages to democracy, both formally and informally (Guttman, 1999). In this regard, as reinforced by critical pedagogy, the *context* for teaching and learning is as important as the content.

With the intense focus on standards and accountability in the neo-liberal era (Hursh & Martina, 2003), do participants in this study perceive themselves to be caught up in a windmill of prescriptive outcomes? In other words, will they determine that their own experiences, which often spurred them on to become teachers, despite the negative undertones, serve to motivate them to be more attentive to the needs of their own students in terms of critical engagement? Extrapolating from that point, will these current and future educators in the study have a stronger commitment to social justice and democracy because of the lack of such a focus in their own educational experience? This presupposes a knowledge-base and capacity as well as an interest to do so, but that central motivation could come to light if it is cultivated throughout the teacher-education program (Torney-Purta, Kland Richardson, & Henry Barber, 2005).

A minority of participants stated that they had a favorable democratic experience, premised on the encouragement and support of their teachers. Here, again, however, participants highlighted voting and elections as being the foundation of their engagement. Further research should examine this area, seeking to determine what dispositions, in particular, underpin the work of progressive teachers. As illustrated earlier in this paper, from a critical pedagogical vantage-point, it is important to make the connection between political work and social justice in teaching and learning (Portelli & Solomon, 2001).

It is encouraging to see that some of the current and future teachers are already predisposed to becoming engaged in democratic education. These comments, however, veer more closely to the *thin* as opposed to *thick* interpretation of democracy. As Torney-Purta, Kland Richardson & Henry Barber (2005) point out, "initial teacher preparation and subsequent development influence students' civic knowledge," (p. 50) which can then lay the groundwork for a progressive and culturally-relevant teacher-education curriculum.

A common theme to the favorable democratic educational experience that some of the participants revealed relates to a singular class in secondary school that focused on government, with a significant emphasis on elections. A minority of participants highlighted how this class facilitated advanced thinking on subjects that they had not previously been exposed to. It would appear that the school culture, in general, did not reinforce the learning taking place in the more focused Government classes.

The CIRCLE (2003) report, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, one of the pre-eminent portraits of the state of civic education, emphasizes the following:

> We do not recommend renewing stereotypical civics classes. For some people, "civics class" conjures up an image of a teacher instructing students on the minutiae of federal legislative procedure or election law, without encouraging them to wrestle with larger public issues, underlying principles, and ways for them to participate in local government and civil society. While there is no evidence that this is the standard approach in today's schools, it is important to underscore that teaching only rote facts about dry procedures is unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from political participation, including voting (p 20).

Therefore, while some participants in this study did benefit from their "Government" or "Civics" class, it is conceivable that many others viewed that singular experience as the totality of their democratic experience at school. The concern here is that teachers and students alike may be led to the false assumption that democracy can and should be taught in only one class, and that it is not a dynamic, critical, cross-disciplinary phenomenon and subject.

How participants view teaching for, and about, democracy elicited a common concern that discussing democracy, in and of itself, could be perceived as indoctrination (Sears & Hughes, 2006). This was not a concern qualified according to varying levels of approach, context, and content; rather, it seemed to reflect the notion that addressing democracy in the classroom could lead to problems, and potentially be perceived as anti-patriotic (Westheimer, 2006). Such an attitude could reflect the current public chill against critical interrogation of the actions of the US government and its hegemonic role in the world (Hoffman, 2006).

This misconception, that it is better to say nothing than to engage in debate, is troubling. There is ample evidence that preparing and facilitating dialogue, especially on controversial subjects, can be of great benefit in the educational environment, especially for the students (CIRCLE, 2003; Hess 2004; Parker, 2003). Educators need to develop the requisite skills and competencies to feel comfortable in addressing controversial issues, as well as allowing students to become engaged in deliberative debate. Yet as Agostinone-Wilson (2005) emphasizes, the propensity to seek "balance" on all issues has left a gaping hole in the critical learning process of students. For instance, what would be the balance in discussing the pros and cons of rape, genocide, or incest? And surely there are many perspectives, but this does not mean that debate should be cloistered into the rigid and alienating Republican-Democrat stricture, in which a variety of intelligent and diverse perspectives are neglected in the name of "balance"[6].

A minority of my research participants felt that teaching about and for democracy is pivotal, and that this should be emphasized by all teachers. There is an acknowledgement here that teachers are best positioned to inform, enlighten, and shape the democratic values of students (Parker, 2003).

> Yes teachers [should teach about democracy], other than parents they are the 1st influence on a child and have great opportunities to instill these democratic values in students. (122/U/M/W/1)

> Yes, I believe that teachers can model democracy every day. From the way the class is run, … classroom rules, the assignments, all should have a voice in the decisions. I do not belong to the students' "world"; I need to "dialogue" with them in order to gain an orientation. (124/U/F/W/5)

> Yes, the social studies dept. should [teach about democracy]. They are capable of stating their opinions. (14/U/F/W/1)

> They [teachers] should [teach about democracy] because it is important and yes, teachers are capable of establishing democratic values in students. (90/U/F/W/2)

It is unclear whether these future teachers are prepared to confront a conservative institutional culture in schools, where they will be positioned to educate and engage students. After all, most of the participants in the study confirmed that schools were inhospitable to them as students in relation to democratic education.

Compatible with the notion that democracy equates principally with elections, many participants favorable to teaching about democracy felt that the primary, if not exclusive, focus should be on teaching about elections. This limited, *thin* interpretation of democracy could lead students to the false belief that there are few actions to be taken to mold and shape democracy outside of voting (Gandin & Apple, 2005).

> Yes [teachers should teach about democracy], by presenting information about all election issues and showing examples of how federal issues affect us on a personal level. (42/U/F/W/1)

> Getting kids to vote is a big thing. (68/U/M/A/2)

> I feel they [teachers] should [teach about democracy], when it comes time for that student to vote he would have a little more knowledge. (91/U/M/A/1)

An interesting nuance to the responses provided in relation to teaching about democracy was the interest in also teaching about citizenship, which was thought to be directly connected to democracy by a minority of respondents. When discussing citizenship, a number of participants emphasized voting and rights. To teach about citizenship, some of the comments directly associated action and role-modeling with achieving positive results, which differed from the strong focus on elections when talking about democracy. This could be, in part, due to the perception that citizenship deals more directly with "good citizens" and community service than democracy, which seems to have a more specifically "political," or electoral connotation.

Theme Three: Understanding power and difference

When asked about social justice, many respondents referred to race, which was no longer considered to be a significant issue for them. Yet reactions differed greatly between White and racial minority participants in the study, which echoes some of the work I undertook a decade ago in relation to White and racial minority teachers in Toronto (Carr & Klassen, 1997). Therefore, there appears to be ambiguity in the concept of social justice. When race is not understood to be part of a project of social justice, and there is a resultant neglect of intersecting forms of identity and marginalization (Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004), education for political literacy becomes an even greater challenge (Freire, 1970).

As Carr and Lund (2007) have argued, Whiteness, namely in the form of White power and privilege, is a fundamental component of the racial template in developed countries, and is particularly anchored in the cultural landscape in the US. Discounting the salience of race, particularly among predominantly White teachers who are steadily facing more racially,

culturally and ethnically diverse classrooms, is a potentially dangerous development for teacher education programs, educational systems, and local and national decision-making authorities. The study of Whiteness (Carr & Lund, 2007) raises a number of themes that quickly get us to the seemingly intractable notion that Whites are not fully part of historical and contemporary socio-cultural, economic, and political inequities. The issue of power, therefore, underscores how teaching about democracy must also include serious and sustained debate on how and why decisions and structures—especially about race—evolve the way they do. Ultimately, the debate may lead to fundamental questions about how there can be homelessness, poverty, racism, sexism, violence, corruption, and war in a democracy. The conclusion of any such debate will be less important than the process of engagement throughout.

As can be seen in the comments below, more nuanced and explicit support for linking social justice and democracy is made by some older graduate and racial minority participants. This connects to the lived experience of participants, who are more comfortable in acknowledging and acting on injustices within society. The power and privilege inherent in Whiteness is germane because understanding this concept is key to teaching about and for social justice (Carr & Lund, 2007).

> In the U.S. racism, a social construct, is used to justify or rationalize the allocation of resources by those who control the majority of the resources. Many are duped to believe that because they resemble those in control, that decisions are made to benefit or include them too. (129/G/M/A/5)

> Having equal rights is important to democracy, and racism is a violation of our equal rights. (12/G/F/W/2)

> I feel we will have a female president before a black one. (47/U/M/W/1)

Avoiding an interrogation of the social construction of identity, especially in terms of race, can lead to the amplification of stereotypes, compounded by a lack of intercultural dialogue. The fact that much of society is still divided along racial lines further strengthens the call for critical social justice work in teacher-education programs. As pointed out in the CIRCLE (2003) report, more resources, energy, time and focus are required for various forms of "pedagogy and management that exemplify democracy" (p. 31). Democracy cannot be disconnected from social justice if the object is a *thick* interpretation, learning for participatory experience and critical engagement on the part of students and teachers.

A point that seemed to resonate with a number of participants is that there is significant injustice within the American political system based on social class. Many participants did not make the natural linkage between disenfranchisement based both on social class and race, which, in effect, downplays the intersectionality of identity (Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004). In other words, marginalization can take place at a number of levels, within a range of contexts, and the reluctance to focus on race is supported by the ideology of merit, individualism, and color-blindness exemplified by Whiteness (Carr & Lund, 2007).

> Rich people seem to always have more than poor people when it comes to politics and rights. (17/U/F/W/1)

> The more important or even "rich" a person is, they can get away with more things than an average person would. (35/U/M/W/1)

> Some laws are skewed to favor people. The people in power make the laws so they are the ones who get the most out of them. (71/U/F/W/2)

Working-class White students have direct experience with social and class disadvantage, but the common linkage to other types of marginalization—in

other words, the intersectionality of identity—is not readily perceived or understood. The internalization of Whiteness, again, can play a nefarious role in perpetuating the re-production of unequal social relations through education, without addressing critical issues required to engage and transform society (Carr & Lund, 2007).

Discussion

The research presented in this paper encourages us to reflect on how democracy should be enacted in schools. A case can be made that democracy should be supported by education, yet in the current neo-liberal bias toward testing, standards, and accountability, which largely excludes concerns about democracy and social justice, no such agreement exists around the philosophical and practical applications of education for democracy. There are, therefore, obvious concerns related to how teachers understand democracy, how they teach for democracy, and how school systems support such democratic engagement. This obviously relates to political literacy for a *thick* as opposed to a *thin* interpretation of democracy. Stevick and Levinson (2007) connect the debate on democracy with a *thick* notion of democratic citizenship:

> The question of "what kinds of knowledge are needed," however, is not just a question for researchers but is also a question for the education of citizens anywhere. Just as the free, fair, open, regular, and contested elections constitute a minimal conception of democracy, a minimal conception of responsible citizenship requires "the capacity for informed, reasonable, deliberative and freely made choices in response to competitive public elections and contested public policy issues" (Patrick, 2002,p.17).

Thus, the over-riding theme and framework of (inequitable) power relations must be understood in order to do democracy. A critical pedagogical approach, as espoused by Freire (1970), Kincheloe (1993), and McLaren (2007), is necessary in order to address the pivotal issues, questions, and concerns related to democracy, including poverty, racism, and other inequities, the distribution of resources, power-sharing and decision-making processes, and collective engagement. Teacher-education programs should vigorously embrace contentious and controversial themes and approaches as a way of preparing current and future teachers for their work in the classroom (Banks et al., 2005).

Kincheloe (1993) has provided ample justification for teachers to become more critically engaged in their own teaching and learning, and re-center the place of critical thinking, while eschewing the common practice of over-focusing on content and lesson-plans in order to. This will require, Kincheloe maintains, formally and informally acknowledging the political nature of education, and breaking away from the meritocratic mythology prominent in neo-liberal discourse. Elsewhere, Kincheloe and Weil (2004) argue that "previously neglected perspectives—sociocognition, issues of political economy, complexity theory, and critical theoretical notions of epistemology and power theory" need to be brought to light in order for critical thinking to be more fully integrated and valued in education. Perhaps going against the grain of their own educational experiences, in which cultural influences promote patriotism (Westheimer, 2006) and an avoidance of critical debate (Agostinone-Wilson, 2005), teacher educators should work diligently to disrupt the myth that democracy and social justice are side-bar issues reserved for social studies teachers. A more global approach to understanding these broad concepts will lead to better as well as more engaged teaching and learning (Parker, 2003).

Ryan (2006), in writing about inclusive education and inclusionary practices in urban school settings, cautions that inauthentic attempts to simply demonstrate change by inserting actors of various origins into the mix will ultimately fail.

> The answer is that the game itself—the system—has to change. It has to acknowledge the contributions of not just the regular or traditional contributors, but also what others have to offer. Meaningful inclusion involves more than engineering minor problems; it can only be achieved when the structural and inherent features of an already unequal system are changed. Doing this means not only permitting access for all, but also allowing the accessed to shape the game so that they will be able to contribute and benefit from the game just like everyone else. New players need to be empowered so that they will gain confidence and develop skills to control their participation and contributions and their own lives (p.24).

Thus, the issue of power is decisive in determining who will succeed, how decisions will be made, and what the educational experience will resemble. Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik (2004) write on the inequitable power relations that frame the macro- as well as the micro-educational context for students, parents, educators and other interlocutors, and cautions educators to concern themselves with how and why marginalized groups do not succeed in public education. One message from the research in this paper is that White students need to be exposed to diverse and authentic experiences that will help them comprehend better and to work more effectively with heterogeneous student bodies.

Campbell (2000, p. 205) has pointed out that there are several ways of teaching for democracy:

> 1) teaching "about civic responsibility, the electoral process, and the U.S. Constitution"; 2) "using social participation strategies…"; 3) "promote democracy in the classroom (is) by developing in students a preference for fairness, justice, and mutual respect…"; 4) "teach students to work together to resolve problems and to achieve goals".

The range of democratic practices, therefore, involves a process as well as a systematic and explicit effort to inculcate democratic values. Stopping this process at the formalized and limited first step of conveying information resembles Freire's "banking" concept, which institutionalizes a passive and neutralized approach to democracy, apt to counter any progressive engagement. The results from the study presented in this paper conclude that more focus and energy is required throughout the teacher-education program to prepare current and future teachers to be comfortable with developing democratic values and in assisting students to become critically engaged in democracy (CIRCLE, 2003).

Galston (2003) makes the connection between civic education and political participation, arguing that schools must focus more on basic democratic and citizenship skills in order to endear youth to the formal democratic apparatus in society. Similarly, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have documented how schools do democracy, concluding that there are various approaches (like service learning, for example) that may not have a meaningful impact if a more explicit political interpretation is not introduced. Given the evidence in this study and elsewhere (Holm & Farber, 2002) that US educators, generally, have a weak or *thin* understanding of the influence and legacy of the United States in the global setting, serious questions about the meaning of political literacy in education need to be raised. To this end, in a formative document outlining principles and concepts for "educating citizens in a global age", Banks et al. (2005) argue for a re-invigorated approach to democratic education, with a greater focus on diversity and international connections. The importance of international and comparative education is an important finding of this research, as is echoed by the CIRCLE (2003) report, in that limited knowledge and exposure to the outside world may lead to isolationist, inward thinking that runs counter to the types of action required to address the global issues mentioned in the introduction, such as war, the environment, migration, disease, and poverty.

Conclusion

Based on the findings from this study on democracy in education, there are a number of areas that could benefit from further examination. Below are some of the questions that could form the basis of a framework focused on political literacy, critical engagement, and a *thick* democracy that takes social justice matters fully into consideration.

a. Educational curricula

i. What is explicitly asked of teachers and students through curriculum and other policy documents with regard to democracy, citizenship, and social justice?
ii. Who is involved in developing the formal and informal curricula of schools?
iii. How can the myth of social studies as the only area to explore politics best be approached and rectified?

b. Teacher preparation

i. How are educators prepared to understand and interact with democracy?
ii. What types of on-going support are provided to teachers to undertake critical work?
iii. How are educators evaluated to ensure that they are able to effectively engage in democracy?

c. Institutional culture

i. How do educational systems support, cultivate, and demonstrate leadership for democracy in education?
ii. What is, and should be, done to encourage a culture of democracy in schools?
iii. How are macro issues defined, articulated, and funded and what is the linkage to social justice within the institutional culture of educational systems?

d. Accountability

i. What leadership measures are in place to ensure that democratic policies, practices, and outcomes are obtained?
ii. How are academic standards connected to democracy, citizenship, and social justice?
iii. How are decision-making processes evaluated to ensure that social justice will be an authentic concern in schools rather than a mere written policy directive?

e. Civic engagement

i. How should students become engaged with democracy at school?
ii. What should be done to forge a stronger linkage between U.S. citizens and communities and international matters?
iii. How should the formal curriculum recognize the importance of civic engagement?

f. Political education

i. How can controversial issues be addressed by teachers without the fear of being labeled anti-patriotic?
ii. What can be done to introduce students to the complexity of politics, including problematizing the electoral process?
iii. What strategies, measures, activities, and experiences should be infused into the formal and informal educational experience in order to support and integrate political education and political literacy into schools?

In sum, to critically engage students in, and about, democracy in schools, educators need to feel supported to do so during their university training, as well as within the institutional settings where they find themselves as teachers. What seems to be fundamental here, as exemplified in the research

presented in this paper, is the need to articulate engagement and a critical conceptualization of democracy. A typically *thin* view of democracy seems rather ingrained, in large part through experience in schools, and also through formative life-experiences. An important consideration, therefore, for developing critical democratic values in schools is how educators conceive, construct, and experience democracy, since this will influence what they do in the classroom and within the school culture.

From a critical pedagogical perspective, starting from Paulo Freire's seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), several key themes are presented, which, together, articulate an understanding of the gravity of the problem of marginalization, disenfranchisement, and inequitable power relations. Freire speaks of the direct link between humanization and dehumanization, as well as between oppressors and oppressed; he portrays the "banking concept of education as an instrument of oppression", and advocates instead the process of liberation and critical consciousness (*conscientização*) through/in education, and the fundamental importance of culture in shaping the educational and political experience. The notion that education can be a liberating force, one that challenges the mundane formula of training young people or simply preparing them for society is, therefore, characterizes Freire's revolutionary approach to education. Similarly, Giroux (1988, 1993) sees the potential for "emancipatory pedagogy" through a new form of literacy and engagement, building on the political foundation of education shaped by Freire. In opposition to present reforms in education that favor standardization, homogeneity, testing, competition, and an infusion of the business world into the classroom (Hill, 2003; Hursh & Martina, 2003), Freire's (1970) critical philosophy proposes an organic re-thinking of who the students are, as well as validating the foundations of their life experiences.

The study presented in this paper raises concerns about the degree to which educators can and do explore democracy, particularly in relation to engaging students in meaningful and critical democratic activities. The implications for achieving and promoting political literacy in schools are multi-fold. Through the practice of critical pedagogy, a critical assessment of the ideology and cultural acceptance of neo-liberalism in education should be undertaken in order to avoid the deleterious effects of less democracy in schools. Adopting a critical approach to understanding and constructing democracy in education, as suggested by the above framework of inquiry, would assist educators to grapple with contentious issues, and, possibly, to transform education.

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Notes

1 Hill (2003) argues that neo-liberalism is quickly suffocating democracy in education because of the forced marketization of education, including:

1. a Business Plan *for* Education: this centres on socially producing labour-power (people's capacity to labour) for capitalist enterprises,
2. a Business Plan *in* Education: this centres on setting business 'free' in education for profit-making,
3. a Business Plan for Educational Businesses: this is a plan for British and US based Edubusinesses to profit from international privatizing activities (p. 2).

2 The notion of *thick* and *thin* democracy is borrowed from Gandin and Apple (2005), who build on the seminal work of Benjamin Barber (1984). Barber raises pivotal questions on the saliency of liberal democracy, including the tension between individualism and the rights of all citizens.

3 To clarify this point, in the state where this research took place teachers are required to complete a Master's degree in education, which then ensures their re-certification.

4 Although some professors may integrate a critical approach to such issues even if they are not formally articulated in the official program, this is often an additional rather a mandatory part of the teaching and learning process. This is, however, a question of great debate in the literature on teacher-education, as exemplified by the critical pedagogical approach advanced by Kincheloe (2008), which has a more explicit connection to the political nature of education. Therefore, the analysis of the findings in this study must consider how the teacher-education program may or may not be contributing to enhancing the relationship to *thick* democracy.

5 One important proviso here is that I am more interested in the potential for critical political literacy than the actual pedagogical content used by educators.

6 It is commonly accepted in the US that the two mainstream parties (Republicans and Democrats), which seem to resemble each other in many ways, comprise the range of perspectives in American political life. There is rarely any space or time for other political parties during political campaigns, on the news, or in public life. Critically examining this phenomenon would be a good place to start for educators in the classroom. Can there be other forms of democracy, if they do not mirror the US model? Thus, the notion of political literacy and a robust embracing of the international context should be a fundamental part of the teacher-education process.

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