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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and education for democracy

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and education for democracy

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We are very happy to present this second issue of the Inter-American Journal of Education for Democracy. Producing a peer-reviewed journal has proved a more complicated and demanding task than we originally anticipated, especially considering that most of the work is done on a volunteer basis, that the editorial committee is located in different parts of the continent, and that the process of evaluating the many papers submitted in three different languages creates additional logistical challenges. Nonetheless, and despite the natural growing pains, the Journal is overcoming these and other challenges, and we are already busy preparing the third issue.

This second issue of the journal, published at the dawning of 2008, coincides with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, arguably one of the most important documents produced in the 20th century, and certainly a central reference for all those who work on education for citizenship and democracy. The Declaration was produced, discussed, and approved during a lucid, creative, and responsible moment of humankind after the painful experiences of two world wars. The declaration is organized in a beautiful preamble and 30 articles. The articles in the first two thirds of the declaration (1 to 21) deal with basic human, civil, and political rights. Several of these rights can also be found in the legislation of many individual nation-states. One of the most important contributions of the Declaration can be found in articles 22 to 28 because, for the first time in human history, it addressed issues of economic, social, and cultural democracy, and articulated them in terms of fundamental rights for all human beings. Particularly significant for the purposes of this journal is Article 26, which, among other things, proposes that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality, to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to promoting understanding, tolerance, peace, and friendship among all nations, and racial and religious groups.

Indeed, the 1948 Universal Declaration put great hope in educational institutions to promote awareness of the newly proclaimed rights. From the outset, the Preamble of the Declaration asked every person and every social organization “to strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms.” Moreover, immediately after the approval of the Declaration in December of 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations called upon all member countries to disseminate it widely, especially in schools and other educational institutions. However, it is not clear to what extent member countries have addressed this call in their curricula, textbooks, and actual lesson plans. Moreover, we wonder what proportion of students all over the Americas have had the opportunity to read, reflect upon, and discuss the Declaration as part of their school experience.



The team that prepared the text of the Declaration worked under the direction of a Canadian human rights advocate named John Peters Humphrey. The Chair of the Commission was Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and also a passionate human rights advocate, who called the Declaration the international Magna Carta of humankind. She argued that the acceptance of these rights throughout the world was a precondition for peace by creating an atmosphere in which peace could grow, and noted that “the destiny of human rights is in the hands of all our citizens in all our communities.” Today, many of the rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration sixty years ago are still unfulfilled. Not only have the social rights proclaimed in the second part of the declaration often been considered “soft law” by member states (and hence seldom translated into enforceable legislation), but even many of the basic civil and political rights mentioned in the first 21 articles are still ignored every day in many parts of the world. Among them is the right of habeas corpus, which can be traced back to the promulgation of the Magna Carta in 1215.

In this context, the contemporary project of education for democracy in the Americas must be strongly linked to efforts aimed at ensuring that at least the minimum core of basic civil rights enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in many national constitutions, are respected in every corner of the continent. The project must also promote a comprehensive approach to citizenship that covers not only basic civil rights, but also the political, social, economic, and cultural rights mentioned in the 1948 Declaration (examined during the same time period by T.H. Marshall in his influential scholarly work on this topic), and outlined in the American Convention on Human Rights of 1969 and, more recently, in the Inter-American Democratic Charter of 2001.

Indeed, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, despite being a relatively short text, makes 20 references to rights, which signals the importance attributed to this concept by signatory members. Moreover, the Inter-American Democratic Charter also makes several references to education. In its preamble, for instance, it notes that education is an effective way to promote citizens’ awareness concerning their own countries, and thereby to achieve meaningful participation in the decision-making process. In Article 16, the Charter points out that education is key to strengthening democratic institutions, promoting the development of human potential, alleviating poverty, and fostering greater understanding among our peoples. Furthermore, Article 27 gives special attention to the development of educational programs and activities to promote good governance, vibrant political institutions and civil society organizations, and democratic values (including liberty and social justice). As an outgrowth of the movement and principles that gave birth to the Charter, one of the main purposes of the [Inter-American Journal of Education for Democracy](#) is precisely to foster intellectual discussion and exchanges about efforts to promote education for democratic citizenship across the region.

To that end, we offer this second issue of IJED, which includes four articles and one critical dialogue. The first article, *Aulas en Paz 2: Estrategias pedagógicas* (Classrooms of Peace 2: Pedagogical Strategies), is the sequel to the article *Aulas en Paz: Resultados Preliminares de un Programa Multi-Componente*, which was published in our previous issue. In the current article, the Colombian research team formed by Enrique Chaux, Andrea Bustamante, Melisa Castellanos, Manuela Jiménez, Ana María Nieto, Gloria Inés Rodríguez, Robert Blair, Andrés Molano, Cecilia Ramos, and Ana María Velásquez examines the most effective pedagogical strategies that have been used to nurture certain citizen competencies: those emotional, cognitive, and



communicative abilities that, together with knowledge and aptitudes, allow individuals to act constructively in society. The study reports on a formative evaluation of a citizenship education program implemented in three Colombian urban schools with students from low socio-economic backgrounds. This study provides an interesting contribution to the theory and the practice of our field by bringing our attention to particular teaching strategies that promote the development of particular civic competencies.

In the next article, *Educators and Education for Democracy: Moving Beyond “Thin” Democracy*, U.S.-based educator Paul Carr reports on a study conducted with education students (both in undergraduate and graduate degrees) attending a university in the Mid-West of the USA. Distinguishing between thin democracy (focus on electoral processes) and thick democracy (focus on critical engagement and social justice), Carr’s study highlights 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 in a thick way; and 3) the importance of understanding power and difference in relation to democracy. Carr’s study 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. A general hypothesis guiding this paper is that progressive democratic education work in classrooms and schools, along with the resultant experience for the students, is diminished if teachers have a weak attachment to democracy themselves. The research leads the author to the development of a framework for conceptualizing democracy in education, with a focus on what educators can do to become more critically aware and engaged.

The article *Educational Reform and Democratic Practices in Guatemala: Lessons Learned from the Communities in Exile*, by the Canadian scholar Michael O’Sullivan, notes that, for a variety of reasons, the educational reform provided for in the 1996 Peace Accords, which aimed to infuse the history, language, and culture of the Maya people into Guatemala’s national curriculum, has not yet been implemented. The paper explores the initiatives taken by local Maya communities to address this situation by creating instances of local power, where education from a Maya perspective is being promoted in local schools, with or without Ministry of Education collaboration. O’Sullivan focuses on the role of two non-governmental organizations that support Mayan communities, and particularly on democratic educational projects that were developed first in refugee camps in Chiapas, Mexico, during the 1980s, and later on, during the 1990s and the first years of the 21st century, in Guatemala itself. In the end, O’Sullivan provides an important analysis of the challenges and possibilities of educational democracy from the social and cultural margins, and of the imperative for including indigenous rights and perspectives in any conception of education for democracy.

The strongly indigenous southern Mexican state of Chiapas is also the location of the next article, entitled *La Participación Social en Educación: Hacia una “Comunidad Escolar” en Las Margaritas, Chiapas* (Social Participation in Education: Towards a “School Community” in Las Margaritas, Chiapas). In this paper, the Mexican educational scholar Marcos J. Estrada Ruiz explores the relationship between civil society and the political “field” by examining the different types of participation undertaken by members of an intentionally formed educational community (a municipal council for social participation in education). Using a conceptual framework that problematizes the separation between political society and civil society (and consequently arguing that social participation in education is actually a form of political participation in the educational field), the study closely analyzes the perspectives espoused by three different educational actors in the community:



teachers, parents, and students. Whereas the three actors agree on the need for more communication, participation, and responsibility to build a genuine educational community, they hold different assumptions and propose different courses of action depending on their different positions and experiences in the educational system. By drawing on the vivid first-hand testimonies of participants in this educational community, Estrada Ruiz illuminates for us the dilemmas that must be faced in nearly any community striving toward democratic arrangements.

Finally, in the “Dialogues” section of the journal, Bradley Levinson interviews Sylvia Schmelkes, one of the most prestigious and talented educators of the continent. Sylvia Schmelkes has a long experience as an educational researcher that started several decades ago at the Centro de Estudios Educativos, one of the first educational research centers of Latin America. Later on, she worked in the Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas (CINVESTAV-IPN) of México, and from 2001 to 2007 she worked in the Secretariat of Education of Mexico (SEP) as Coordinator of Intercultural and Bilingual Education. Presently, she is the Director of the Department of Education of the Universidad Iberoamericana. In this conversation with Bradley Levinson, Sylvia Schmelkes reflects on the relationship between education and democracy—particularly, on the tension between freedom and authority, on the complexities of intercultural and bilingual education, on the limits and possibilities of different participatory strategies in education, on the role of the councils for social participation like the one examined by Estrada Ruiz in the previous piece, and on the characteristics of Mexican teachers. Towards the end of the interview, Schmelkes analyzes the differences between the world of academia and the world of policy-making by recounting her experiences in both worlds, including an unusually frank self-examination of some of her own accomplishments and failures as a policy-maker, and a generous sharing of lessons learned.

We invite you to read, discuss, critique, and disseminate the articles included in the second issue of the Journal. Unlike most academic journals, RIED-IJED is free and open to the public. We are committed to preserve this characteristic because we believe that a journal on democracy should be available to all. At the same time, this has financial implications because, unlike other journals, we do not have any revenues from libraries, institutional subscriptions and individual readers, and hence we must address particular challenges in terms of resources that other journals may not face. We are able to publish the journal thanks to the generosity of collaborating institutions and the voluntary work of editors, editorial board, reviewers and authors.