

Revista Interamericana de Educación para la Democracia

RIED  **IJED**

Interamerican Journal of Education for Democracy



**Reflections on the Call
for the Special Issue on
Education, Citizenship and
Interculturalism¹**

Vol 2, No. 2
September, 2009

Document available in:
www.ried-ijed.org

ISSN: 1941-1799



Reflections on the Call for the Special Issue on Education, Citizenship and Interculturalism¹

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Abstract:

This critical essay challenges two assumptions that permeate the call for papers for this special issue of the *Inter-American Journal of Education for Democracy*. First, it questions the claim that American societies are “[becoming] progressively more diverse,” implying that in the past they were less diverse. Second, it disputes not only the theoretical merit of the concept of “authentic democracy,” but also the assumption that conflictive views and group relations are not compatible with it. Last, the essay engages in a discussion of how these assumptions, if not pointed out, hinder the purpose set for this special issue and democratic education alike. Academics and policy makers must exercise caution when formulating and setting up frameworks for debate.

Introduction

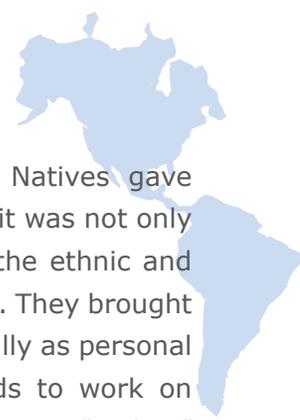
In any debate, what we say and how we say it set the ensuing tone. The words chosen to frame a debate may inadvertently lead to misinterpretation and unintended implications. This is the case of the call for papers for this special issue of the *Inter-American Journal of Education for Democracy*. At least two assumptions permeating the call for papers deserve special attention.² The first one claims that American societies are “[becoming] progressively more diverse,” implying that in the past they were less diverse. This claim, which may raise concerns of ethnocentrism, is at the root of the invisibility of so many groups in America.³ Second, there is the assumption that an “authentic democracy,” whatever this means, is a univocal concept instead of one that allows for variation, and that conflictive views and group relations are not compatible with an “authentic democracy.” Both assumptions appear to contradict the view that “[d]emocracy grew up historically out of struggles among social groups and between state authorities and their subjects” (Skocpol

& Fiorina, 1999, p. 12). The purpose of this critical essay is to address these assumptions as they relate to education, citizenship, and interculturalism. The essay starts with a historical account of America’s diversity. A theoretical discussion about democracy follows. In light of these two sections, the third one addresses what an education for democracy, citizenship and interculturalism should entail, which may not necessarily contradict the vision the editors tried to articulate in the call. The essay concludes by highlighting the responsibility that the academic and policy communities have to enhance a democratic dialogue on these issues.

America’s Diversity Misunderstanding⁴

Social Diversity

American societies have always been diverse, some more than others. In addition, a common denominator of the American continent has been the continuous reshaping of its demographic and cultural patterns, in some cases by force and unintended circumstances,



in others as a result of governmental planning and, in a few cases, voluntarily.⁵ I shall present a few examples here with the understanding that by no means is this section either an exhaustive history of America's diversity or a comprehensive account of the continent's past. The histories of the American republics do not parallel one another, though there are significant structural analogies. The examples in this section illuminate some of those analogies, or exceptions to them, and serve to contextualize the point of my critique.

Diversity is not a novel occurrence in America. "Once there were two thousand indigenous languages spoken in the Americas" (Winn, 1992, p. 21), and by the time of European conquest, although demographic numbers are uncertain, "over sixty million indigenous peoples inhabited our lands" (Winn, 1992, p. 20; Bethell, 1984). Even before then, it was a region of immense variety, from nomadic hunters and food-gatherers like those who wandered the northern and southern plains of America and the Amazon rain forest, to the sophisticated civilizations of the Andes and Mesoamerica, where many of their descendents still live today (Elliott, 1984; Axtell, 2001). The maintenance of these rich pre-Columbian Native American cultures and their diversity was of no interest to European invaders' attempts to brutally subjugate the "newfound land" and its people, and to make of them profitable resources for their metropolises. Modern scholars indicate that despite the degradation these numerous Native groups suffered at the hand of the conquest, many of their institutions and cultures survived into this day (Bethell, 1984; Keen, 1986; Axtell, 2001).

The early period of European conquest and settlement added a new layer of diversity to America's demographic landscape. Mixed-race

unions between Europeans and Natives gave birth to a *Mestizo* population. But it was not only the Europeans who transformed the ethnic and racial composition of the Americas. They brought enslaved Africans with them, initially as personal servants, and later as field hands to work on plantations and mines, replacing an "Indian" labor force diminishing due to illness, systematic suppression, and Spanish and Portuguese laws banning "Indian" enslavement (Sánchez-Albornoz, 1984).

While Africans came to outnumber Europeans in the Antilles, they also constituted a significant minority group in Mexico and Peru, as well as in Uruguay, Brazil, and the United States, among other territories. Those enslaved Africans, and the offspring of their unions with "Whites" and Natives, known as *Mulatos* and *Zambos*, were the ancestors of many people of African descent in the Americas today (Sánchez-Albornoz, 1984; Marcílio, 1984; Halperin Donghi, 1993). The conquest of the Philippines was another way by which involuntary migrants reached America during the late 16th century. "Especially after the union of Spain and Portugal in 1580—there arrived at Acapulco, from the west, several thousand Filipino slaves, plus some from China, Japan and even the East Indies" (Sánchez-Albornoz, 1984, p. 21). Most of them settled in Mexico and Peru. This ever evolving diversity that made America so distinct threatened its hierarchical society and political order.

With the rich ethnic and racial variety of people of pre- and post-colonial times as backdrop, the 19th century also reshaped America's demographic patterns. Either as part of an industrialization process in countries such as the United States, or as the result of an export-driven economy such as in Argentina, Brazil and Canada, another massive influx of Europeans



voluntarily reached the American continent in search of land, jobs, and opportunities. This diverse group of European nationals settled, for the most part, in North America and southern South America. Asians arrived to these lands too during the 19th century. Chinese, Japanese, Indians, and Indonesians replaced African slave labor in the plantations of the Caribbean and in Brazil; they also played a crucial role in the Peruvian guano industry (Winn, 1992; Halperín Donghi, 1984). Arabs and Jews arrived in smaller numbers, but soon attained significant economic and cultural roles where they settled (Bethell, 1984).

While there is no doubt that migration patterns continued to change the continent's 20th and even the early 21st centuries' demographics, the assumption that "our societies are becoming progressively more diverse" is historically inaccurate, for they have been diverse since their very origins.

Diversity and its Politics

The rich diversity exemplified above was at the core of the emergence of, and struggle for, both nations and national identities. "Hierarchies of gender, race, and class molded both pre- and post-revolutionary communities" (Holt, 2003, p. ix), to the extent that in some American societies ethnic and racial differences had, at times, either reinforced discrimination or undermined it (or both) through the process of nation-building. Nineteenth century pro-independence elites "drew on classical liberalism to reject imperial hierarchies and assert sovereignty and democracy" (Appelbaum, Macpherson & Roseblatt, 2003, p. 4), yet they constructed the ideal traits of nationhood in opposition to those who did not belong to the imagined community: the uneducated, the slaves, the "Indians", the women, or the property-less. Central to this

argument was the fact that people "were not born equal." In other words, diversity was a highly contested issue.

In contrast to 19th century liberals, who saw difference as a condition for exclusion, conservatives promoted a form of racialized inclusion of lower classes; but by no means was this inclusiveness equated with egalitarianism. An example of the latter was Juan Manuel de Rosas in Argentina, "who [as governor of Buenos Aires from 1829 to 1852] established ties with *Mestizo gauchos* (mixed-race cowboys), incorporated Afro-Argentines into the military, and wove Afro-culture into patriotic rituals" (Appelbaum et al., 2003, p., 5; López-Alvarez, 2003). An example from Peru illustrates this point, too. "[T]he modernizing oligarchical state that began consolidating in Peru at the end of the nineteenth century based itself on the ethnic refragmentation of Peruvian territory—White, *Mestizo* and Black coast; Indian highlands" (Mallon, 1992 p. 45). In an attempt to control the highlands population for successful state formation, Lima indirectly integrated "highlanders" into a national project through local "*caudillos*—landowners or merchants who, in exchange of the repressive support of the state, guarantee the political loyalty of their regions" (Mallon, 1992 p. 45). Both examples explain how the affirmation of difference was used to reinforce and support ethnocentrism as well as social and economic hierarchies.

While there were some attempts at making the young republican systems more inclusive through popular insurrections and incipient agrarian reforms, the late-19th and early-20th centuries' "modernization worldviews" prevailing in the continent equated "whiteness" with "progress" and "civilization." European racial theories, supported by "science," propagated the belief that "Indians," "Blacks," and peoples of



mixed-race were incapable of being civilized. This view was embraced by several modernizers, for example Brazil's Tavares Bastos and Argentina's Sarmiento, "for whom progress depended upon a total renewal of the population of the Americas" with European immigration (Murilo de Carvalho, 1992, p. 157). During this modernizing period, ideas of egalitarianism and democracy did produce some changes in the political system, as was the case of the 1912 Sáenz Peña Law in Argentina, which broadened the social base of democracy. This law established universal, secret, and compulsory suffrage for all male citizens over the age of 18. However, these changes were still limited in scope.

Once again, the claim that American societies are "[becoming] progressively more diverse" fails to acknowledge the continent's complex and rich diverse past, and its political uses. The implication of this assertion not only tends to "[reproduce] stereotypes, discrimination and institutional racism," as stated in this call, but it also hinders the purpose set for this special issue of the *Inter-American Journal of Education for Democracy*, even when well-intentioned. Moreover, this implication permeates the curriculum and actual school practices throughout the continent, reinforcing a narrow historical view of America's past and present, which puts into question the possibility of strengthening inclusive democracies in the region.

Democracy, Struggle and Equality

As Tilly (2007) suggests, "to take democracy seriously, we must know what we are talking about" (p. 7). Democracy, as an ideal type of system of government, has been, for centuries, part of academic and policy debates.⁶ Needless to say, what democracy is and is not, as well as the concepts of education, citizenship and interculturalism, have been not only highly

contested but also historically determined, reflecting changing and competing ideological values (Crick, 2002). While the intent here is not to engage in an extensive review of the vast political theory literature on democracy and democratization, this section does address those key scholarly productions that contribute to reflection on the assumption at hand.

Students of modern democracy and democratization generally refer to two types of definitions. One is the *procedural* approach to democracy, which identifies a limited set of characteristics that qualifies a regime as democratic, concentrating their attention on free and competitive elections that engage an important number of citizens. The other is a *process-oriented* approach, which identifies a minimum set of processes for a regime to be considered democratic.⁷ Following the latter, Dahl (1998) defines a "polyarchal democracy" as a regime that results in the following six distinctive principles: elected officials; free, fair and frequent elections; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; associational autonomy; and inclusive citizenship. These criteria for democracy assume a working process, a series of formal exchanges between the state and society. Tilly (2007) complements this view by suggesting that while Dahl's criteria are useful to identify whether a system is or is not democratic, it does fall short in providing comparative information about differences across time and space. One may want to know how free and fair elections are handled in a particular context and if, for example, the United States is less democratic now than it used to be. Therefore, "[i]f we want insight into causes and effects of democratization, we have no choice but to recognize them as continuous processes rather than simple steps across a threshold in one direction or the other" (Tilly, 2007, p. 10).



A working democratic regime usually has to mediate deep conflicts, for example, between freedom of expression and associational autonomy. Powerful autonomous elitist, racist, and sexist associations tend to undermine citizenship's inclusiveness. It is in the analysis of this process of mediation between state and society, where one can judge the degree of democratization, or in other words, the state's ability to represent the demands of its citizens with equal political rights. This is not a conflict-free process. Tilly (2007) contends that this judgment requires further considerations in a pluralistic society, especially with regard to:

...how wide a range of citizen's expressed demands come into play; how equally different groups of citizens experience a translation of their demands into state behavior; to what extent the expression of demands itself receives the state's political protection; and how much the process of translation commits both sides, citizens and state. Call these elements breadth, equality, protection, and mutually binding consultation. (p. 13)

Consequently, democratization represents the movement towards high standards in all of these dimensions, thus a state-society complex's struggle to a broader, more equal, more protective, and more binding consultation.

If democracy is better understood as a process, which comes in degrees and involves continuous mutually binding negotiation, then the concept of "authentic democracy" is not only vague but also of little theoretical help. What does it mean and entail? When do we know we have accomplished it? How does it help us to understand, for example, the struggles for democracy that several countries in the region

experienced during the 1980s? When democracy returned to Chile in 1989, the political elite and the military regime agreed upon a procedural democratic government at the expense of pursuing justice by prosecuting perpetrators of human rights violations committed by the military during the previous regime. This was most probably not agreeable to the majority but was at least acceptable; it was a negotiated compromise to deepen democracy in the future. The Chilean example symbolizes democracy not as an end point but rather as a dynamic process towards higher standards of it.

Before looking into the intersection between the points I have made so far and education for citizenship and interculturalism, let me generally address the problem social inequality poses for democratization and democracy, which is at the center of the discussion of this special issue. Tilly (1998) identifies two conditions by which social inequality negatively affects democratization and weakens democracy. One is the institutionalization of categorical differences by race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion and similar broad categories. The other is the translation of those differences into the political arena, which inevitably instate resource disparities in public policy. Durable differences hinder coalition formation and negotiation across groups. At the same time, "they give members of advantaged groups incentives and means to evade outcomes of democratic deliberations when those outcomes counter their interests" (Tilly, 2007, p.110). This was the case described in the first section of this critical essay. Nineteenth-century American elites repeatedly used their leverage and categorical differences to organize social and political life and to reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities.



Referring to the United States' democracy in particular, Skocpol (2004) convincingly suggests that:

...as long as centralized and professionally managed . . . advocacy groups retain special access to government and the media and have more to offer to office-seeking politicians than other kind of actors, American democracy will not become more inclusive. (p. 281)

Both Tilly and Skocpol, although using different terminology, speak of isolating public policy from categorical inequalities. Barry (2001) goes even further to suggest that categorical inequalities prevent us from identifying the main sources of injustice, which for him are socio-economic, and consequently diverting the path of political struggles that concentrate on liberal egalitarian aims. Thus, the challenge for working democracies is the extent to which the political struggle centers on either sustaining or altering those inequalities. In other words, the key is to deepen democracy by appealing to common principles that are shared, and not necessarily rejected, by those who have different views. This aim, in turn, should be embodied in the practice of particular communities too, such as schools. And here is where education for democracy, citizenship and interculturalism come into play.

Education for Democracy, Citizenship and Interculturalism

The schooling system should go beyond preparing students to challenge historical misunderstandings as implied in the first section of this essay, to serve the purpose of the politics of identity, to instruct about democratic institutions and rule of law, to promote national unity as well as reflect on diverse cultures, or to help students learn and function in cultures other than their

own both nationally and globally (Banks, 2004). According to Acosta (2004), a school's central aim "is to foster the wide acceptance of common norms, principles and procedures that provide a certain coherence and viability to communal life and allow the different members and groups of society to get along together in a democratic way" (p. 6). However, given the plurality of views in a democratic context, it is also necessary to instill moral disagreement about public issues (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996) as a way to encourage understanding, tolerance, and mental openness to diverse rational views.

According to Dewey (1975), schools do not constitute preparation for future social and civic life but life itself. Consequently, the educational system has a responsibility to educate students for democratic deliberation, an education based on the recognition that moral arguments apply to everyone, should be reciprocal, and pertain to the public domain—they are controversial and subject to discussion and disagreement (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). As Callan (2004) suggests, by doing so, schools enhance citizenship education by exposing students to different conceptions of moral life that exist in an intercultural society and to the types of controversies this diversity tends to generate. In short, this view promotes a critical and autonomous individual. Thus, the goals of schools should be to develop students' abilities to understand different perspectives, communicate their views and values to other people, listen to one another's moral claims (yet not to accept all as equally valid), and engage in reciprocal moral argumentation (Gutmann, 2004).

When moral disagreement is guided by reciprocity, it enables students to respect each other as moral subjects who share the goal of deliberation as common ground for agreement



even when they may strongly disagree with one another. When students and citizens reason under these conditions, “they seek fair terms of social cooperation for their own sake” (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 2). Reciprocity binds moral and political argumentation through the sharing of a commonly agreeable method of reasonable public inquiry that makes each individual accountable to every other on the grounds of civic equality (Gutmann, 2004).

Moral disagreement is central to understanding democracy as an ever-evolving process, and not as an end in itself, as the concept of “authentic democracy” suggests. It is indispensable for achieving interculturalist aims as well. America’s ever-evolving societies demand constant reevaluation of past and current political struggles, power relations, and sources of inequalities. Schools have to guarantee that education for citizenship engages in this kind of reevaluation. Integrated into an inclusive intercultural curriculum, education for democracy and citizenship has to address the socio-economic origins of those inequalities and support controversial political debates about them. Both the curriculum and school practices must enable students to continuously rethink and reframe their values and social positions. In short, an education for democracy, citizenship, and interculturalism should center its focus in achieving those higher standards of democracy. Schooling has a crucial role in preparing students as political subjects, women and men genuinely concerned about the polis in which they live.

Concluding Thoughts

Academic and policy environments have a vital responsibility in providing the proper context for deliberation regarding education for democracy, citizenship and interculturalism; this is why it is important to reflect about the analytical

frame of this call for papers. Reflecting on how the discussion is set up and carried on, constitutes in itself an essential part of the democratic process, an example of reasonable reflective engagement that brings to light multiple views of the public good. But our responsibility has also a deeper dimension: finding a common ground by which reciprocity can be exercised; and this is no different than the responsibility schools have. We should guarantee that all voices are represented in the public debate, even if we agree or not with each or any of them.

As the political theorists I referred to in the second section of this essay put it so brilliantly, the public discussion in general, and this one in particular, has to be isolated from the possible cooptation of particular groups. Academics and policy makers alike should secure equality of opportunity to express any view of the public good that is consistent with social justice. My initial point about America’s diversity misunderstanding is geared to achieve this aim. If those of us in academia who write, teach, and research are not cautious about what we choose to say and how we say it, particularly if we pretend to influence policy-making, we are at risk of leaving disfranchised numerous and diverse groups. By securing the common ground (or rules) of public academic and policy debates, and insuring it accounts for social equality, we play an important role in strengthening democracy. It is for this same reason that the call for this special issue must be welcomed.



Endnotes

1 I want to thank journal editors, the guest editor for this special edition and anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. Also, I want to thank Sylvia Bigler for her assistance during the preparation stage of this manuscript, and Cesar R. Torres for helping bring light to some of my ideas.

2 Below is the complete text of this special call.

Special Edition on Education, Citizenship and Interculturalism

As our societies become progressively more diverse, the quality of relationships amongst different groups and cultures becomes increasingly important. Unfortunately, the close interdependence fostered by our societies also provides a fertile ground for the emergence of stereotypes, prejudices, and racist and discriminatory attitudes built over generations through collective imaginaries. These stereotypes hinder the resolution of structural inequalities, which in turn negatively affect ethnic minorities in our countries, and reproduce social asymmetries based on cultural diversity.

An authentic democracy—an aspiration for all of our societies—cannot coexist with racism, since democracy itself implies respect for those who are different, as well as the promotion of intercultural coexistence. The visibility of different cultures, and the possibility of making their voices, proposals, and expectations audible and visible, are indispensable for the vitality of a democracy founded on pluralism. The role played by education in this matter is undeniable.

3 I use the term America to designate the entire American continent.

4 This section of the essay is contextual. I use secondary sources to illuminate the point of my critique. I do acknowledge that at times this section engages in generalizations about the continent's history, however, it is almost impossible in an essay of this kind to do justice to such a rich and complex history.

Even when the examples provided have a slight Latin American focus, by no means do I exclude non-Latin America countries from my analysis. I use examples from Latin America because it is the region that, by professional orientation, I know best. Yet, I do not pretend to know the specificities of every Latin American country.

5 I primarily address here America's diversity in terms of race and ethnicity since these are the main concepts the call for this special edition touches upon. However, America's diversity is much more complex than this; it does include social class, gender, religion, special needs, age, and sexual orientation.

6 In his book *Democracy. A Very Short Introduction*, Bernard Crick traces the origin and development of the term and how it has been used since ancient Greece and Rome to this day.

7 Other types include *constitutional* and *substantive* (see Tilly, 2007). The Freedom House Indicators, for example, look for mainly procedural characteristics, though they "incorporate some substantive judgments about the extent to which a given country's citizens enjoy political rights and civil liberties." (Tilly, 2007, p. 8).



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