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Ethical-political education for democracy open to diversity

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This issue of the Interamerican Journal of Education for Democracy contains a series of articles that illustrate diverse facets of democracy, and also diverse facets of education for democracy. This brings a wealth of insight and analysis, with each article approaching its particular topic from a different theoretical perspective. Despite this diversity, a common thread is interwoven in all the articles: specifically, emphasis on the importance of a deliberative, participative citizenry, supported by a critical review of the current situation and acknowledgement of differences and plurality as phenomena that must be guaranteed in a society that prides itself on being democratic.

Other features shared by the articles presented here are a critique of the type of education for democracy taught in Latin American school systems, and an invitation—whether explicit or implicit—for the entire society to participate in education for democracy in different contexts.

The Latin American authors, four women and one man, from universities located in different parts of the region, make important contributions based on their own rich experiences and trajectories, regarding the relationship between education and democracy. Their articles do not offer formulas or precepts, but rather critique the current state of education for democracy, define principles for action based on solid arguments, and provide analytical tools that can be very useful in educational research.

The article by Ana María Salmerón (National Autonomous University of Mexico) shows us how the works of some authors considered to be among the "classics," such as Dewey, are valid in societies that aspire to a more highly-developed democracy.

Salmerón explores the possibility of articulating political life with education as a way of understanding and improving society. She brings together features from theories of diverse tendencies and disciplines, specifically from Dewey, Freire, Giroux and Arendt, in a coherent manner, to criticize education in Mexico, which she describes as based on the transmission of "democratic catechism," and she proposes the application of two strategies. The first strategy, clearly rooted in Deweyan thought, consists of civic experimentation. The second stems from the development of imaginative skills linked to the capacity for making political and ethical judgments for the reconstruction of social and political practice. Salmerón insists that this task must be based on an understanding and critique of political

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practice as it actually exists, and one's vision of the desired democratic life. From this perspective, utopian logic has an important place.

The reader will clearly see that the indoctrination and authoritarianism that tend to be favored in schools are the focus of this author's criticism. Salmerón maintains that the only way for subjects to prepare themselves for social life is to become involved in it, and for schools to become communities of life.

In their contributions to contemporary theoretical debates on democracy, Rosa Nidia Buenfil (DIE-CINVESTAV, Mexico) and Mercedes Oraisón (Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, Argentina) each take a particular position regarding what education for democracy means in current times.

From a perspective of political analysis of discourse, Rosa Nidia Buenfil examines the relationship between education and democracy, through the problematization of the concept of democracy. This author argues that the meaning of democracy depends on the context, and to support this assertion, she reviews history from the moment at which democracy appeared in Mexico as a political value, until the most recent redefinition of the concept, which presents democracy as a guarantee of a community's salvation and fulfillment.

Buenfil uses the paradoxical nature of democracy as a point of departure: democracy is a social construct and therefore temporary, but the meaning it acquires at each moment in history tends to become firmly established, as if it were an extra-worldly *eidos*. She criticizes essentialism and aprioristic universalism with respect to this topic, and opts for a contextualist, pluralist position. Her argument is oriented toward denaturalizing the democracy-education binomial in order to maintain that the plurality of meanings of the signifier "democracy" places us inevitably in a dimension in which we must make a commitment to and take the responsibility of constructing the possible meanings of the democratic life we aspire to and are willing to defend.

Argentinian researcher Mercedes Oraisón analyzes the educational potential of experiences and practices of participation in social and political contexts in which actors from civil society and government interact in order to intervene in public matters. Based on a critical examination of neoliberalism and its effects, she reviews the tensions encountered in the democracy that actually exists, and argues in favor of a deliberative type of democracy that questions representative democracy, by including mechanisms such as referendums, plebiscites and the revoking of mandates, and at the same time narrows the gap between representatives and those represented.

Oraisón presents arguments that justify her rejection of both depoliticized participation lacking dialogue with the state, as well as non-political, reactive participation that refuses to become involved in constructing the public sphere. She maintains that desirable interaction between civil society and the state takes place in three dimensions: expression, involvement, and intervention oriented toward favoring the capacity for taking action and the competencies in dialogue required for participation and deliberation in collective spaces and in the networks interwoven between them. Here she is referring to the intervention that takes place in NGOs, citizen associations, forums and citizen committees established for the purpose of politicizing individuals and assisting them in fulfilling the role of citizens as praxis. Oraisón maintains that one learns by participating, and this is possible if the necessary educational

intervention takes place in collective spaces.

Petronilha Gonçalves (Universidad Federal de San Carlos, Brazil) addresses an original facet of the relationship between justice and democracy, specifically ethnic-racial relations in a context of plural democracy. This author states that education on and for ethnic-racial relations is a necessary ingredient for constructing a democratic society in which equal rights and power are guaranteed to all social groups. This implies knowledge of and an appreciation for the histories and cultures of the peoples involved in the origin and the consolidation of nations, and of their world visions and their projects as societies. Using the example of Brazil, Gonçalves urges us to not forget that what we are today was built upon the discrimination and suffering of indigenous peoples and those of African descent.

Gonçalves strongly criticizes so-called "racial democracy." From her perspective, this notion refers to a form of democracy that disguises racism through a discourse on *mestizaje* and favors assimilation in the interest of a model of homologation that strives for universality, characterized by Eurocentricism, and involving a rejection of "one's own" and of diversity. Education on ethnic-racial relations signifies precisely a criticism of this model and the demand for diverse identities that we have yet to discover and acknowledge in order to build a new future for all.

The current issue closes with an article by Maxim Repetto, who emphasizes the present and the future of indigenous education in the Amazon region of Brazil. This article illustrates the way in which communities are taking ownership of schools and promoting their transformation in order to build, over a period of time, what is known today as indigenous school education.

Repetto presents a detailed description of the process in which communities are negotiating meanings with government agents, demanding respect for their cultures and languages, and focusing efforts on preparing individuals for leadership positions and increasing the population's level of schooling. This process reveals how democracy has been constructed in communities in order to generate a specific school system for indigenous populations. Thus, democracy does not appear within the contents of an educational program, but is rather a condition that opens up educational opportunities and generates a school culture embedded with democratic values—although constantly threatened by technocratic tendencies con-trary to intercultural, deliberative, participative schools like those demanded by the communities in this region of the world.

In summary, it will be clear to the reader of the articles included in this issue that the authors reject the idea of understanding democracy as a state of affairs that makes it possible to satisfy interests and needs that are strictly personal. Rather, each author insists that democracy involves the collective construction of *res publica*. The reader will also find latent or open criticism of the kind of democracy that is reduced to merely its formal dimension and to guaranteeing equality and equal rights before the law.

Something highlighted in several of the articles included in this issue is the insistence that democracy is in ongoing construction and a task that implies the unavoidable need to deliberate and participate in political decisions and the exercise of power, in both the realm of communities and the collectives of which they are composed, and in the realm of relations between civil society and state agents. Such relations are proposed as not merely a configuration of public opinion but rather an

open, ongoing dialogue based on mechanisms for society's vigilance over the state.

The reconstruction and re-evaluation of the public sphere and civil society's recuperation of power are matters not far removed from the positions taken by the authors participating in this issue.

The authors of the articles published here avoid presenting established models that would be contrary to the plurality that each of them vigorously defends. Precisely for this reason, their texts refer to a type of democracy that not only extends beyond a state of affairs governed by the survival of the fittest, but that also guarantees and values diversity. Overall, the articles illustrate that it is not enough to recognize differences, but it is also necessary to act accordingly, so that diversity will not be sacrificed in the rule of law.

It is fitting to remember the old Aristotelian notion that a general law applied to different cases fails due to its simplicity, and when something is fair, it is only because that failure has been corrected through fairness. The articles presented here insist on diversity and differences to such a degree that democracy cannot be conceived of as separate from a sense of fairness. This is the underlying value in a number of the theses maintained by the authors in this issue: a democratic society is one in which groups whose rights are violated may demand respect for their differences and avoid being homologized through the application of a model of being, living, and projecting oneself that is alien to their culture and history.

The articles demonstrate that what is different and diverse is not opposed to equality before the law and the equal rights characterizing democracy. To the contrary, true democracy is only achieved when differences and diversity are guaranteed. However, the inequality that results when some groups or sectors of a population are placed at a disadvantage, in violation of their rights, is indeed contrary to democracy.

All of the above points to the need to educate citizens to be capable of demanding respect for their identities and rights, and rejecting government decisions that are harmful to certain sectors of the population. Education for democracy, as defined in these articles, is not merely a matter of fomenting traditional citizenship. Rather, the authors propose a political education that prepares individuals for appreciating diversity, deliberation, historic memory and participation in demanding respect for rights. The education proposed is also ethical, since the type of democratic life derived from the theses proposed here requires subjects to be honest, to respect differences and diversity, and to be attentive to others whose rights have been violated, and requires that fairness be applied. Only in this way is it possible to conceive of democracy that is truly open to diversity.

Clearly, those interested in the topic of education for democracy will enjoy the writings presented in this issue.