The Challenges of Democratic Education and Cosmopolitanism in Neo-liberal Times

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Simply stated, democratic education is an education that takes democracy and its associated values seriously both in theory and in practice. However, both education and democracy are much contested concepts. In fact, there are differing and conflicting conceptions and practices of both (Portelli & Solomon, 2001, Price, 2007, and Carr, 2011). This paper will argue that for cosmopolitanism in education to have a real impact, it needs to rest on a robust notion of democracy. It will also identify some of the major challenges faced in our neoliberal times by democratic education.

Democracy is both a moral and political ideal. And as such we know that it will never be fully achieved or finished. This is the very nature of ideals. As an ideal we believe that it is indeed worthwhile to struggle to achieve democracy and the beliefs, conditions, and practices that go with it. As a moral and political ideal, democracy substantively deals with how we as human beings ought to relate with each other. As John Dewey (1938) has argued, democracy proposes a way of life that is the most humane. It is crucial here to note that when we talk about democratic education we are not referring to an education that follows so-called democratic governance. The focus is on the democratic way of life that needs to be enacted in educational institutions. A school principal recently chided me that democracy and education have nothing to with each other in his school as, he rightfully claimed, he cannot convene the entire staff and students to vote on every decisions he has to make. Unfortunately this naïve conception of democracy, which though is very common in popular discourse, is not what is meant by democracy as a way of life.

But what is involved in the democratic way of life? The literature on democracy has identified this way of life by using differing terms: liberal democracy, marketized democracy, minimalist democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, cosmopolitan democracy, critical democracy, and strong democracy (Portelli, 2001; Held, 2006). Each of these terms captures a different way of life associated with democracy. It would go beyond the scope of this short essay to go into the details of the differences
between these different conceptions of democracy (that entail different practices). However, in general, adherents of democracy would concede that democracy, however it is conceived, is constantly being reconstructed (Dewey, 1916) or rewritten (Ermarth, 2007) or rethought (Kothari, 2007) or rediscovered (McDonnell, Timpane & Benjamin, 2000). But the crucial question is whether or not democracy is anything we wish it to be. While definitely allowing for the re-imagining of democracy as social conditions change, I contend that such re-imagining does not imply that there are no core qualities associated with democracy that we cannot give up without exhibiting undemocratic values or actions. There is a democratic soul so to speak. For example, how can one claim to be democratic while abandoning human rights, or promoting racism (individual or systemic, consciously or unconsciously), or promoting the abuse of human beings? Surely one of the central litmus tests of democracy is how we deal with differences. Democracy is not a way of life or a moral and political ideal that promotes standardization or one size fits all, or that promotes fear and shuts off the inquiry into differing albeit conflicting views. The authoritarian crushes disagreements and differences; the soft liberal puts disagreements aside as he or she believes they are all fine as long as they do not interfere with the rights of the individual; the genuine democrat acknowledges the differences, does not shy away from disagreements, and rather than crushing or hiding disagreements and differences, he or she meaningfully engages with disagreements and differences. The crucible that democracy accepts, of its very nature, is to deal with substantive differences in a humane manner. And this is exactly the connection with cosmopolitanism since it “calls for citizens who can respond in ways consistent with the inherent dignity of human beings” (Snauwaert, 2002, 11) while exposing citizens to ‘the diverse perspectives of others’ (Snauwaert, 2009, 101) through which one’s own views are challenged.

But are the procedures of dialogue, open inquiry, and tolerant and critical demeanors sufficient for the survival of the democratic way of life? Overall, pragmatists believe in the faith of the scientific method or procedures in dealing with substantive differences. Others, including critical democrats (e.g. Freire, 1998), argue that the democratic way of life demands more that procedures that are deemed to be neutral and objective. A robust democratic way of life has to go beyond procedural matters and deal with substantive issues.
Unfortunately the neoliberal culture that has dominated the ‘western world’ (and is now being forced on ‘other’ worlds) has militated against the growth of a robust democratic culture. As the 19\textsuperscript{th} century liberal individualism and negative freedom shifted to the excessive individualism and the so-called free market, excessive competition, presumed neutrality and objectivity, narrow utility and accountability have dominated our way of life. The way of life that has emerged from Neoliberalism is not consistent with the soul of democracy, for it has put aside the power of the humanities (Nussbaum, 2011) and thoughtful social sciences; it has promoted standardization and privileged rugged empirical evidence to the exclusion of the domains of the moral, critical, spiritual, artistic, and philosophical. Within such a context, enacting democratic education has become an onerous task – especially if, as it should be, it is based on equity rather than simply equality of opportunity, diversity rather than standardization, agonism (adversaries) rather than antagonism (enemies), substantive and controversial issues rather than cold procedures and facts, taking a fair stand rather than pretending to be neutral and reproducing current injustices, and finally embracing social activism rather simply deliberation and discussion.

A democratic education that honours robust democracy has to consciously and, at times, subversively challenge the neoliberal practices in educational institutions (including universities) (Portelli, 2010). We have the moral responsibility to question the myth that the ‘achievement gap’ can be reduced by simply improving test scores of tests that purport to be neutral and objective while at the same time reproducing the neoliberal way of life without ever offering a reasonable justification for it. Of course we have to take numeracy and literacy seriously, but numeracy and literacy are not monolithic entities. There are in fact different forms of numeracy and literacy, and they all deserve to be taught and respected. To paraphrase Freire, reading the word is just as important as reading the world. And the reading of both has to include for example, oral traditions, the poetic, the dialogic, the narrative, and not just the documentary. Democracy calls for a curriculum that takes life seriously in its entirety, and not just on aspects that continue to privilege certain groups of the citizenry (Portelli & Vibert, 201). A true polis is not one based on partial aspects of it; it has to include the cosmos in its fullest sense! And as such, it recognizes the importance of the particular and the universal, the tensions between them, and the need for an ethics of hospitality (Carlson, 2003).
References


