

COMMENTARY

Democratic Education: In Through the Out Door

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INTRODUCTION

Democratic education, the idea that all members of a school community play meaningful roles in determining what is learned and how, has occupied a stable if marginal place in American educational discourse over the last century. Despite a continued interest in democracy as both a means and ends of schooling (Biesta 2006; Parker, 2003; Sleeter, 2008), schools of education have struggled to embrace notions of democracy in teacher education. Our experiences on both ends of teacher education—in universities and in urban schools—have led us to conclude that democratic education is difficult to do when theory and practice, learning and doing, unfold in vastly different communities.

Reflecting on our ongoing work on designing and planning an experimental high school, in this essay we explore the relationship between the where and how of teacher education. We argue that traditional approaches to teacher education reinforce a didactic, and ultimately antidemocratic, model of teaching and learning in which knowledge is delivered from universities to schools. As an alternative, we outline our vision for a school in which both student and teacher education are grounded in principles of democratic learning. Ultimately, we believe that such an approach will result in both more engaged students and better-prepared teachers.

Background

The view of democratic learning and teacher education we present here emerges from our work together both inside and outside of urban schools. In various capacities, each of us has spent several years working at West Philadelphia High School. Three of us have

spent significant time as classroom teachers in urban schools, and three of us have earned doctorates studying schools and now work in schools or departments of education. Over the years, we have spent too many hours reflecting on all that seemed amiss in our experiences: schools that had lost touch with students, and universities that had lost touch with schools. At each level, what was learned in the classroom was considerably removed from what was needed outside of it. Like so many who work in urban education, we daydreamed and argued about how to find a better way.

In 2007, we applied for and won a small grant to plan a charter high school focused on democratic education. Since then, an unfortunate combination of district and state policy changes have precluded us from moving forward on opening the school. We have, however, continued to work on its design and core principles. This work has led us to the concept of the Workshop for Democracy and Social Entrepreneurship (The Workshop), an urban laboratory school serving high school-aged students. The Workshop will be organized around small, collaborative teams of teachers and students designing and carrying out projects focused on solving real-world problems, from the local to the global. It has its roots in the EVX Project, an after school program at the Academy for Automotive and Mechanical Engineering at West Philadelphia High School (www.evx-team.org) in which students, teachers, and community volunteers have built not only award-winning alternative energy vehicles but also a vibrant learning community and, most importantly, student success in and beyond high school. The Workshop aims to pick up

and continue to develop this approach to communal and democratic learning, making it the centering principle of the curriculum rather than an extracurricular activity. At the heart of the school is a belief in the importance of democratic learning communities to the development of all learners, including pre-service teachers. As teachers and teacher educators, our role is to support beginning teachers as they learn to meaningfully (i.e. democratically) participate in and contribute to the community of learners. To do this, we need to change the location, organization, and focus of the education of beginning teachers. Below, we sketch out what we believe are the implications of democratic learning for teacher education.

WHERE (AND HOW) TEACHERS LEARN

Efforts to move teacher education out of the ivory tower are not new. Traditional university-district partnerships have occasionally been reconfigured into professional development schools (Abdul-Haqq, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1994), and, recently, towards community-based teacher education (Zeichner, 2010). The multiple locations where formal and informal teacher education takes place complicate program design as well as evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs. Tension within teacher education programs about the gap between what happens in schools and what happens in coursework has been documented extensively as well (Feiman-Nemser and Buchman, 1985; Grossman, 2005).

Despite these criticisms, most teacher education programs adhere to a traditional model that front loads teachers with pedagogical ideas and skills in order to send them off to practice them in schools. The model uses course-

work to prepare aspiring teachers to student teach, which is itself practice for “real teaching.” For a wide variety of reasons, this model has not worked well to prepare prospective teachers to teach in urban schools. The oft-cited statistic that half of all teachers leave teaching in urban schools within five years may be slightly overblown, but it underscores the need to rethink what we mean when we aim to “prepare” urban educators (e.g., Freedman & Applebaum, 2009). We aim to reverse the preparation paradigm by having beginning teachers’ practical problems guide their learning, and, in doing so, put “theory” in the service of improving practice. This is the same model we ascribe to for our students and ourselves at the Workshop. Just as we hope to reframe student learning around questions or problems that matter to them, our goal is to create learning situations for new teachers that invite them to critically engage theory instead of jettisoning it—an all too common occurrence for beginning teachers, especially in urban schools (Clift & Brady, 2005).

SHIFTING PEDAGOGY BY SHIFTING LOCATION

Changing the location and organization of teacher education could shift its focus away from preparing new teachers and towards participating in democratic learning communities. Putting teacher education where the practice is combines the best elements of apprenticeship—learning while doing and while watching others—with the best elements of democratic education, where problems, questions, and lines of inquiry are developed collaboratively among teachers and students.

To understand how this might look in practice, consider for a moment the topic of classroom management. Generally overlooked in teacher education course work, it is often the first and most pressing challenge for new teachers in urban schools. It is also an extraordinarily complex subject, one whose study can and should be informed not only by diverse bodies of scholarship and theory from psychology to organizational theory, but also by the perspective, expertise and

craft knowledge of both teachers and students in the schools themselves. Treating classroom management as the subject of serious inquiry would help teachers and students to illuminate the unwritten rules that govern behavior in schools, question assumptions about what aspects of classrooms need to be “managed,” and open up a broader conversation about what rules should govern a democratic learning community and what it would mean to follow them.

Such an approach to teacher education requires an approach to course work that is at once more collaborative and more flexible than in traditional programs. At the Workshop, we envision establishing a committee of high school students charged with acclimating student teachers and conducting a series of workshops designed to familiarize the pre-service teachers with the rules, ideals, and history of the school. Portions of the coursework would overlap—there is no better place to contextualize the philosophy or history of education than within a school—as would much of the fieldwork as pre-service teachers worked with students to conduct small studies within the building. As the pre-service teachers gradually assumed more responsibilities, they would be engaged in teaching seminars based on the questions and problems that emerged in their practices. Most importantly, these seminars would begin in and with the experiences of pre-service teachers, inviting them to view their teaching through the lens of their students’ learning. Because this approach to education organizes academic work around problems of practice for all members of the learning community, the learning would unfold slowly, in real time. By explicitly asking that students, pre-service teachers, and mentor teachers share in the educational work, we understand teachers as coming to be “certified” in a community—a designation that is ultimately more meaningful than the arbitrary endpoints set by a state licensing authority.

In our vision for the Workshop, democratic teacher education is seamlessly woven into the culture of the school. But we believe it would be beneficial even in much more traditional settings. Pre-service teachers face a daunting

task in urban schools. They must find their voice as educators, plan and organize lessons, learn about their students both individually and as groups, and figure out a host of rules—official and informal—about how schools work. They wrestle with dilemmas of discipline and control, balancing the need to maintain control in the classroom with the desire to engage students. They are confronted with the harsh reality of students who are often not at all where the public education system assumes they should be academically. And they must confront all of this in real time, while attending to all of other demands of their lives. One of those demands, of course, is their teacher education course work. Imagine if, instead of being ancillary to their work as teachers, that course work helped to explain what was happening in the schools in which preservice teachers were placed, helping them to resolve dilemmas of practice. The result, we believe, would be teachers who are better prepared for the challenges of urban schools and, therefore, more likely to persist, and ultimately be successful, within them.

Learning about teaching in urban schools means learning about urban communities; practical knowledge of such communities lies not in sociological texts, but in the neighborhoods themselves. Democratic teacher education not only seeks community involvement, it depends on it. A school explicitly committed to the process of preparing urban teachers requires broad community engagement in their development. We envision seminars where parents would be the panelists in teaching pre-service teachers about the history of the community, outlining recent victories or present challenges. Such an approach is important both for the knowledge it introduces into teacher education and for the relationships it helps to build.

Training and certifying teachers within schools represents a significant departure from business as usual, both for universities and for schools. It is not without precedent, however. High Tech High, one of the best known charter schools in the nation, has become accredited as a teacher training site and now develops its own teachers on

site. And the idea of wrapping teacher training around the actual experience of working in schools is becoming more common in alternative certification programs, such as the graduate programs enrolling Teach for America members or the many Teacher Institutes cropping up in large districts around the country. The model we propose is, in some ways, a next step along this path. What is different about our approach is that it fuses the idea of on-site teacher development with principles of democratic education.

CONCLUSION

Democratic teacher education both demands and supports significant changes in how teacher preparation programs and schools typically operate. Such change never comes easily. The

approach we offer here is more hypothesis than answer, and we know that our own learning will be significantly furthered by the opportunity to put it into practice, with all of the struggle and failure a project like this one entails. We are certain, however, that we cannot train teachers to teach democratically if our pedagogy itself is undemocratic. Democratic learning begins when teachers acknowledge and engage the voices and ideas of students. Democratic teacher education begins when universities acknowledge and engage the complexity and practice of schools.

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