Social Foundations of Education and Democracy:
Teacher Education for the Development of Democratically-Oriented Teachers

By Leigh M. O'Brien

There is only one road to democracy: education.
(Barber 1997)

Introduction

I am a teacher educator who for 10 years regularly taught a Social Foundations course to Master's-level education students at a small liberal arts college in the northeast U.S. One of the course foci was, of course, democracy and education. To introduce the topic, I first asked the students to collectively define democracy. Although they often struggled, for the purposes of schooling, at least, we often arrived at a definition that looked something like this: *democracy (n):* the principles of social equality and respect for the individual within a community (*The American Heritage Dictionary,* 1985).

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Several years ago I began to use a short piece by Ron Miller to more directly connect this definition of democracy with schooling. Drawing on his review of "eight great books on democratic education," Miller (1995) contends that democratic schools are characterized by:

◆ Engaged, relevant, socially responsible learning;
◆ Cooperation within a supportive and caring environment;
◆ Accommodation to diverse learning styles;
◆ Celebration of cultural [and other kinds of] diversity; and
◆ A fair distribution of resources.

When I shared this list with my students, no one was ever able to name a school in which *all* these characteristics are in place; in fact, they frequently noted that in many schools, *none* of these apply. If that is an accurate assessment of schooling in the U.S. today, and I believe it is, and if it is important to have democratic schools—again, I believe it is—what can Social Foundations teacher educators do to support the development of teachers attuned to and grounded in an education for democracy? And, to that end, how can we make our *own* (teacher education) classrooms more democratic?

The Background

Throughout the history of public schooling in the United States, maintaining our democracy has been cited as one of the fundamental justifications for public support for schools (Miller, 1997; Silberman, 1973; Soder, Goodlad, & McMannon, 2001). The pioneers of public education—among them Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and John Dewey—argued that schools were, in fact, essential to the health and well-being of the republic. This is because relevant, problem-posing, multi-faceted education—democratic education—is central to democratic life; it is necessary for enfranchised citizenship, and for teaching students how to play an active role in the economic, cultural, and political life of the nation (Dewey, 1916; Giroux, 1988; Mills, 1956; Noddings, 2005). A democratic state requires the education of critical, thoughtful citizens who can define their own purposes and are able and willing to act upon their ideas (Eisner, 2001; Freire, 1986; Giroux, 1994).

Thus, in a democracy, we need an education that helps children find their own voices and communicate their own messages, that celebrates the hundred or more languages of children (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). We need an education that supports the development of students who are gloriously different individuals who will enrich our world by posing and solving problems in ways we have never tried. And we need teachers who promote improvisation, surprise, and diversity of educational outcomes as educational virtues (Eisner, 2001, p. 372). In sum, democratic education ought to liberate humans rather than domesticate them; it should unfit them to be slaves, to paraphrase Frederick Douglass.

Certain habits of the heart and mind are central to democratic education and

able to be inculcated early on as well as expanded upon as one grows in knowledge, life experiences, and capabilities: informed skepticism, a willing suspension of prior belief; informed empathy, stepping into the shoes of others without judging and with a genuine desire to understand; and an interest in and ability to utilize imagination, envisioning how things could be different—and better (Greene, 1973; Meier, 1996). Educators who hope to teach toward possibility and "against idiocy" (Parker, 2005) work to awaken students' consciousness through their support for these habits of heart and mind; they teach them to do the hard work of living together democratically.

This kind of education begins and ends in exploration, in the perpetual uncovering and unfolding of self—and others—in the world. This kind of education can help students develop the habits of thinking, caring, and questioning necessary for democratic public life. In contrast, much of our current system of education strips students of their innate sense of curiosity. They are expected to learn what other, more powerful, people think important. Rarely does the American education system allow its students to engage in a meaningful dialogue that might advance knowledge on a particular topic that matters to them—or to society.

In a distressing but regrettably all-too-believable example, Goodlad found that *not even one percent* of the instructional time in high school was devoted to discussion that requires some kind of response involving reasoning or an opinion from students (Peterson, 1996; emphasis added). Karier (1973) sums it up well: A high percentage of the millions of students now in school have learned to live by the bell and passively tolerate boredom, irrelevance, and absurdity in their educational lives in order to achieve future material rewards accruing from selected occupations. Or, as a former colleague of mine put it, "Isn't a large part of schooling just learning to endure boring, meaningless shit?" (O'Brien, 2001)

And of course the degree of democracy that students experience, like virtually all other dimensions of schooling, depends on the student's race, social class, and ability, to cite the three most compelling factors at play (see, e.g., Banks & Banks, 1993; Kozol, 2005; Ohanian, 1999; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). That is, students who are white, middle-class, and academically able are more likely to experience schooling that values who they are and what they bring, and that engages them in dialogue, critical thinking, problem-posing, and exploration. Sadly but predictably, students of color, students from lower-SES homes, and students with learning difficulties are more likely to experience the boring, meaningless shit to which my colleague referred (Meier & Wood, 2004).

To summarize: Schools by and large do not help students understand themselves or their worlds (Emerson, 1966; Karier, 1973; Miller, 1997). They do not serve to open minds, open doors, open possibilities (Ayers, 1996). They do not support the "irrepressible possibility of humans" (Booth, 2001). They do not help children ask and attempt to answer what Ayers (2001) contends is the essential question of education: *Who am I in the world?* Rather, the underlying function of U.S. schooling has been and still is to indoctrinate children into a system of social engineering that

trains them to be quiet in the face of authority, passive in the face of adversity, intolerant in a world of diversity. Through mechanisms of control, schools marginalize and silence children, making most of them afraid to share their ideas, afraid to challenge convention, afraid to question the status quo (Miller, 1997; Postman & Weingartner, 1969). Thus democracy is subverted by a very un-democratic process of education.

And things have gone from bad to worse in recent years as (under the flag of reform) the standardization and testing movement has grown, as income disparities have widened, and as schools have become increasingly re-segregated along lines of socio-economic status and race. As I see it, the current school "reform" movement is based on a mechanistic, reductionist worldview. It's an effort to fashion learning in a universally narrow mold rather than seek opportunities for learning grounded in the diversity of U.S. society. It's about control, disempowerment, and punishment of those who have already been marginalized by social policies. And it's about "social efficiency" and Social Darwinism, a survival-of-the-fittest model that coincides with our country's growing (and largely unquestioned) allegiance to a competitive, hierarchical, and destructive global free-market capitalism. In this model, schools serve to stratify and sort, and ultimately perpetuate, even exacerbate, inequality. Where, in this movement, are the principles of social equality and respect for the individual within a community?

Teacher educators concerned about the lack of democratic schooling ought to be supporting the development of teachers who believe that that every person has the right and the capability to achieve his or her potential within the school and larger community; who believe that education ought to encompass and care for the many facets of the whole child; who believe education ought to help us collectively identify and address important, real problems; and who are willing to work to bring this vision to reality. And teacher educators ought to be making the argument that schools are *the* site of choice for cultivating and activating democratic citizenry because they have both collective problems and diversity (Parker, 2005).

What I Have Tried To Do in My Teaching of *Social Foundations*

As a Social Foundations teacher educator concerned with democratic school-ing, I do my best to challenge, both in the content of my courses and the pedagogical model I use, the kind of schooling described above: a highly individualistic (yet rarely individualized), fragmented, job-focused training that pervades our school systems. This anti-democratic model sees teachers as technicians and students as passive recipients of others' "expertise" (Novinger, O'Brien, & Sweigman, 2005) and is found in teacher education classrooms as well as in PreK-12 classrooms, albeit rarely to the same extent—so far. To counter this model, I will make an argument for teacher education classes as an important site for student/teachers to *experience* democratic education. Without living democratic education, it is difficult to foster

the same in one's own teaching. We learn about democracy by acting democratically and developing democratic habits.

With the approach I am advocating here, ". . . becoming educated involves being exposed to many knowledge claims, perspectives and critiques and developing the capacity to critically evaluate alternatives" (Lubeck, 1996, p. 159). This kind of preparation ". . . helps teachers learn how to look at the world from multiple perspectives, including those which may be quite different from the teacher's, and to use this knowledge in developing pedagogies that can reach diverse learners" (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 12).

Thinking What We Are Doing

Since for teacher educators our teaching also serves as a demonstration of sorts for our students—pre- and in-service teachers—we can try to model practices we think worthy. We might begin by thinking "what we are doing" (Arendt, 1971; Darling-Hammond, 1996) when we teach teachers.

> If teachers want their students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of mind that will allow them to live fully and well, to be strong and capable and competent, and to have the capacity to shape their individual and collective destinies, then they must struggle to figure out how to realize these lofty goals in specific situations with particular students. (Ayers, 1993, p. 22)

How do teachers figure this out? For Ayers, and for me, the answer comes in part from Maxine Greene. She argues that teachers must learn how to "do philosophy." To do philosophy is to become highly conscious of the many facets of the world, to be "wide awake" to new possibilities. To do philosophy is to develop a fundamental project, moving beyond reality as fixed and given to construct new conceptions of reality. More specifically, "to do *educational* philosophy is to become critically conscious of what is involved in the complex business of teaching and learning" in all its particularities (Greene, 1973, pp. 6 & 7).

Greene contends that teachers must be self-conscious about their role in the sense-making process; they must continuously clarify for themselves the meanings of education. They must take an authentic stance, choose to be personally responsible, think about their own commitments and actions, no matter how terrifying it might be to do so. "If [the teacher] can learn to do philosophy, he may liberate himself for understanding and for choosing. He may liberate himself for reflective action as someone who knows who he is as a historical being, acting on his freedom, trying each day just to *be*" (Greene, 1973, p. 7).

In order to move our students toward doing philosophy, I believe that we must "practice what we preach"—or teach. The deliberate and thoughtful modeling of desirable teaching practices in teacher education seems central to me, but I know from my students' and my own experiences that Foundations of Education can be taught in a cultural transmission model that has minimal relevance to students' lived

situations. Teacher educators need to consider the implications of teaching in an authoritarian, top-down way that valorizes one kind of "expertise" (Novinger, O'Brien, & Sweigman, 2005) and negates student power, inquiry, and voice. Not only does this "banking" model (Freire, 1986) turn students off to investigations of critical materials and ideas, but it is antithetical to the development of a democratic classroom.

It follows, then, that we must connect our strategies with our purpose(s): If we want to support teachers in their work of teaching children to be vital contributors to our democracy, we must strive for a model of teacher education that asks them to view teaching as a complex, challenging, social and intellectual task. And we must view learners of *all* ages as complex individuals who need to be supported in their construction of liberatory knowledge (see, e.g., hooks, 1994), via an education that "empowers all citizens to be respected, fulfilled human beings" (Cannella & Reiff, 1994, p. 43).

Challenges and Possibilities

However, challenging this idealized vision, Leach-Bizari (2006), a recent graduate of the teacher education program described in the introduction, argues that her instructors often exhibited what she called "the Gepetto problem," an unfortunate tendency to see their students as in need of betterment. If only they were more like this or more like that, was the message she heard. Building on this image, she suggested that many teacher educators see themselves as missionaries who in one semester can—perhaps, must—"save" their poor, unenlightened students. One of the means by which they try to do this, Leach-Bizari contends, is to use what she called "faux empathy." Rather than trying to understand the students' real-life experiences, concerns, and so forth, many of the teacher educators she had practiced a kind of patronizing listening which did not require them to really hear or address the issues that are troubling students. Last, Leach-Bizari used my notion of schooling as including a large diet of boring, meaningless shit, and argued that students in teacher education programs should just refuse to swallow it. For these reasons (and probably others), Leach-Bizari felt that democratic education was, more often than not, subverted in her teacher education program.

In response to the concerns Leach-Bizari raises, I will suggest a few, tentative possibilities for Social Foundations teacher educators aligned with the practice of democratic education. This, of course, presumes I think her concerns are valid, and much as it pains me to admit it, I do. Drawing on previous work (Novinger, O'Brien, & Sweigman, 2005), I suggest that a large part of the Gepetto problem is that our positioning as teacher educators places us in the role of experts training novices when we work with PreK-12 teachers. With our position comes power; as persons perceived as having expertise, we also have agency. Conversely, so-called classroom teachers typically have little power and hence little agency. They are

38

positioned as recipients of our disseminated wisdom and socially sanctioned knowledge about how to "best" work with children and youth. However, we can choose to accept or resist particular positionings (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999); we are active agents in the construction of our subjectivity (Ryan, 1999).

Given our agency, can we re-conceive of expertise as being developed in collaborative work rather than something a select few bring to the table? To do so, we would have to believe that knowledge is distributed in the education community and does not reside solely in the heads of those considered to be experts. We who have been designated as experts must acknowledge that our own beliefs are only one of many realities. Further, we must accept that some (much?) "expert knowledge" is flawed, impractical, or imperfect. If the core of such belief is solid, the experience that flows therefrom will have a much better chance of leaving spaces for teachers to move forward, creating their *own* paths to "best practice." As opposed to telling our students, "If only you were . . . ," we might ask instead, "Who are you? What of yourselves do you bring to the enterprise of teaching? What are your 'best possibilities'"?

The central problem with the expert discourse model is that teaching is seen as a role, a composite of functions that teachers fulfill on behalf of others, rather than an identity that speaks to who the teacher is: her or his own investments, beliefs, commitments, and desires. The teacher's identity and integrity are thereby inevitably challenged (see, e.g., Palmer, 1998). Ultimately, when this view of teaching is sanctioned, teacher education simply reinforces the type of knowing and being already in place. It functions then to merely maintain and accommodate the status quo.

How might we resist or contest this approach? Can we frame teacher education as a dialogic process wherein teachers begin to construct and re-construct themselves as subjects? What would an organic, re/generative, life-affirming model of teacher education look like? Can we create a classroom community where social equality and respect for the individual are central? How, that is, might we create a more democratic teacher education classroom?

We can make changes in small ways, paying attention to how we name ourselves, and how others are named; how physical environments are structured and who structures them; how learning is assessed, and by whom; and how success or failure are defined, and by whom. Examining and changing our modes of address and our literal and figurative locations is a concrete strategy for being part of the solution, for acting as saboteurs from within a system that disempowers not just PreK-12 teachers, but all of us in education.

In addition, if we really want the teachers with whom we work to "read their worlds," we must be in dialogic relationship with them: teacher as student and students as teachers (Freire, 1986). We must stop trying to "save" our students and instead ask them, "What do *you* need? What can do I have to offer that might be helpful to you?" This position argues for support being provided as needed in areas that teachers find most important. We can try to bridge the gap between the "ivory

tower" and school settings by crossing the border from the land of expertise to a place where all are valued for what they bring. This means we who have been identified as experts need to work beside teachers, as allies, as they take ownership of their teaching (e.g., Lewis, 2002). We need to live principles of democracy, egalitarianism, and critical inquiry in our work with teachers if we are to have any hope of making teaching truly liberatory work.

We can also look for openings, small spaces in which to transform the standard hierarchical and technical-rational approaches and interpretations of our roles as teachers into reciprocal, equitable, and collaborative forms (Miller, 1997). We can work to create a model of teacher development that is the antithesis of indoctrination, which views teaching as a complex, challenging, social and intellectual task. The work we do, then, might prepare ". . . teachers to be observers and documenters of children and researchers of learning rather than consumers of dicta for practice" (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 12) and could challenge us to ask not what is 'true' but rather what best fits the situation (Lubeck, 1996, p. 159).

"In communities of practice, teachers might then explore a range of alternatives tailored to specific situations" (Lubeck, 1998, p. 289). Although not a cure-all, a view of teacher as learner via collaborative and action-oriented classroom research, for example, positions teachers very differently than the expert discourse does: it puts them in charge of their own learning. Most teacher educators have long held the conviction that children need to construct their own understandings (e.g., Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Fosnot, 1989), but we have not often brought that belief into the college classroom.

Furthermore, the ways in which we make sense of our worlds cannot be separated from the context in which we operate; context always matters. Any attempts at change must consider local conditions, norms, and goals. This we too rarely do, other than rhetorically. What if we were to deliberately diminish status differentials and see knowledge as jointly created in dynamic interaction—with others and with specific environments? Suppose, as Lubeck (1998) argues, that we did not judge and prescribe, but rather helped teachers address concrete and practical dilemmas; suppose that roles were blurred and that the opportunity to collaborate did not become a guise for indoctrination in the model/approach chosen by the expert. Suppose we respected differences, and had the flexibility to try new ideas, blend approaches, and innovate over time. Suppose learning communities were assembled from the strengths and capacities of the educators who come together willingly to make changes they perceive as important (Lubeck & Post, 2000; McGhan, 2002). Might this not in part address Leach-Bizari's concern about teacher education being just so much boring, meaningless shit?

Further suppose, as Nel Noddings (1992) suggests, that we really believed that caring relationships are central to teaching and learning, and understood that the establishment of such relationships can only occur over extended periods of time, and so we focused on long-term, mutually beneficial experiences. Could we in this

way move past faux empathy to real relationships based on reciprocal care? To create humanizing relationships we need time: time to get to know one another, time to hear all voices, time to lessen power inequalities and to develop a sense of autonomy for all, and time to work free from pressing immediate concerns. If we had/took the time, could we then attempt to build Maxine Greene's vision of a humane and playful community, "at once beautiful and just"? (1995, p. 459)

Teaching Hope

Of course this is an ideal; there is no doubt that those seeking to substantively change the system have been (sometimes literally) shot down time and time again. On the other hand, I am an idealist who thinks a "politics of educated hope" (Giroux, 1997) can counter the twin perils of apathy and cynicism (Anyon, 2006). Without hope, we risk falling into a malaise of resignation ("why bother? I can't make a difference") rather than feeling strong enough to take on a politics of resistance and transformation. As Myles Horton once explained, "only people with hope will struggle" (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998, p. 44).

Valora Washington speaks eloquently to the importance of teachers seeing their role as visionaries and transformers:

> Transformation of the social order begins with an act of imagination that elevates a startling dream of change above the intimidating presence of things as they are. Further, if such dreams are passionate and clear, and if they can call a great many people into their service, they may ultimately give shape to the future. In this way, the future vibrancy of our profession [teaching] depends of the ignition of bold ideas, passionately conveyed. (1996, p. 32)

Thus, if we give students the skills merely to conform to a job or the power structure, we are being immoral and illiberal because we are contradicting their right to liberty and power —strong words from Dewey (cited in Greenberg 1992), perhaps even more important today to teachers trying to make a difference in a world focused on testing and accountability, success for few, and marginalization for many. In a democratic education, all have rights, freedoms, and responsibilities. This kind of education is characterized by conversation (with peers, texts, and teachers), collaboration, cooperation, compromise, constructive conflict, the social construction of knowledge, and shared decision-making/power (e.g., Rinehart, 1999).

By acknowledging, even highlighting the diversity of experiences and perspectives that students bring to our classes, students are able to see themselves in the context of social views different from theirs, and thus they are able to reconstruct themselves in the face of a troubled society. Absent diverse views, unable to change themselves, they are likewise unable to change their worlds, and thereby become slaves to their history and habits (Glassman, 2001). Leistyna, drawing on the work of Fraser, summarizes thusly: "If we are to truly practice

democracy, we are compelled to *embrace*, rather than eliminate, multiple dissenting publics with diverse concerns" (1999, p. 178).

I agree with Dewey who thought disputes to be ". . . potentially healthy and educative, for they stimulate communication of values, clarification of beliefs and positions, and questioning of entrenched beliefs and positions" (Simpson, 1998, p. 97). While environments with a high level of agreement between participants are relatively comfortable, they are not beneficial. That is because the actors do not engage in free inquiry, the foundation of Dewey's democratic society. It is therefore incumbent on the educator to create diverse environments that demand social inquiry, despite the fact that many find reconstructing the world disagreeable (Glassman, 2001). Alexis deTocqueville famously called this work the "arduous apprenticeship of liberty."

Conclusion:
Teacher Education for the Creation of Democratic Community

According to Greene, a democratic community is always a community in the making. "[I]t is energized and radiated by an awareness of possibility. To develop a vision of such possibility of what ought to be, is very often to be made aware of present deficiencies and present flaws" (1995, p. 166). Social Foundations teacher educators need to work closely with pre- and in-service teachers to re-think their/our assumptions about the meaning and purpose of education in a changing, challenging, contradictory world. Again, this is not an easy task with an assured outcome. In these conservative political times, it is even more difficult to speak out about changes needed. However, as Anyon reminds us, "it takes the active appropriation of whatever conditions exist to begin transforming the present" (2005, p. 149).

Are we aware of—and committed to—the possibilities for change? Do we work with our students to create a vision of what ought to be (Greene, 1973)? How can we be allies with and advocates for classroom teachers (and others) struggling to be visionaries and transformers? Social Foundations teacher educators will not and cannot alone change perceptions of schooling, but we can contribute to a view of education as inextricably linked with democratic life. Through our efforts to think what we our doing, to challenge the culture of expertise, and to "do" Dewey, our practices in some small way may support the development of democratic character and dispositions in the pre- and in-service teachers with whom we work. We may, in fact, be paving the road to democracy.

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