Book Reviews

Doing Democracy: Striving for Political Literacy and Social Justice.
Reviewed by Kumari Beck, Simon Fraser University.

The notion of democracy has become a platitude. A participant (Gloria) in Price’s (2008) study of ‘self-described democratic educators’, a chapter in this book, expresses it well: “I hear politicians and people say all kinds of things about democracy, but when you listen to them, they are not saying anything with meaning” (p. 126). Indeed, we hear multiple critiques of those who are violating democratic principles, laments over voter apathy, and political rhetoric over the so-called defence and protection of democracy through aggressive and violent means. In a recent CBC interview (Tremonti/CBC, 2012), Charles Taylor asserted that democracy cannot be treated like some abstract idea that simply ‘is’; nor can it be taken for granted. One must ‘do’ democracy, enact it with others, in order for it to live, and evolve.

Darren Lund and Paul Carr, on their second editorial collaboration, (following ‘The Great White North?) enthusiastically offer their book Doing Democracy, as a contribution to this enactment of democracy in education. It is at once “a critical assessment of democracy” (p19) and a collection of conceptual and practice-based articles on the whys and hows of ‘doing’ democracy in educational settings. “We are concerned that if we do not do democracy in education there will be clear and obvious consequences for society” (p. 18) they state. This book is not about creating definitions of democracy, nor is political literacy about increasing voter turnout.

Democracy is an ethos, an ideology, a set of values, a philosophy, a contested terrain of action and debate, and a complex, problematic, dynamic framework and terrain in which diverse forces and interests and experiences intersect to develop relations and relationships that continue to evolve” (p. 18)

Such complex terrain invites multiple levels of dialogue, practice and conceptual understanding.

From an excellent framing introduction by the editors, the book unfolds as an evolving conversation with each set of authors enhancing the dialogue.
through 19 chapters organized in four sections. The introduction is a masterful and comprehensive review of the many approaches to and elements of democracy in education, and a framing of the two main interconnected themes of the book – the advancing of equity and social justice, and an exploration and identification of what political literacy might be. Lund and Carr outline the connections between political literacy and engaged and critical citizenry in advancing social justice outcomes for everyone. The authors in this collection pick up these themes in various ways illustrating the intersections among them very powerfully.

In the first section, ‘Framing democracy and democracy education’, authors provide a strong critique of neoliberal capitalism in globalizing conditions (David Hill), problematize the notion of a universal ‘commonsense’ (Jennifer Tupper), show how ideas of interconnectedness and interdependency from global education and global citizenship education are useful (Michael O’Sullivan), and argue how the status quo of power relations such as White Privilege enjoyed by teachers, (Sammel & Martin) results in the erosion of democratic foundations. The potential is to be found in resistance and rebelliousness (Fleuri). This section has a good balance of critique, as a first step towards a robust political literacy, and possibilities, in moving towards equity.

This theme of dissonance and dissidence is carried forward in the second section where authors illustrate alternate forms of democratic education. Two chapters in this section stand out. Jason M.C. Price, whose conceptual ideas are based in Aboriginal Elder knowledge and Red Democracy, presents findings from a study of educators and their perceptions of democratic education in practice. Alexandra Fidyk uses a refreshing combination of Buddhist, Vedic, and Jungian ideas integrated with quantum physics to present an approach that can deal with deep social and ideological difference. Other chapters address issues of open mindedness: critical reflexivity in enhancing dialogue (Lisa Taylor), challenging fundamentalist thinking and addressing religious debate (Alizha Asgharzadeh), and bringing in a gender lens. This section demonstrated the connection between and importance of issues in equity education to democracy education.

Case studies are presented in the third section of the book showing how class, race and other social divisions prevent participation by all. Njoki Nathane
Wane writes about primary education of girls in Kenya; Sarah Barrett and Martina Nieswandt take on the promotion of democratic engagement through science education. Economic literacy and the absence of class considerations in classrooms in the USA is the focus of Mary Frances Agnello and Thomas Lucey, while Karim Remtulla addresses the emergent phenomenon of online activism. While case studies are valuable in lessening the theory-practice divide in a book of this nature, this section provided interesting and somewhat unique examples from a range of disciplinary contexts of what can be done in classrooms in advancing the principles and goals of democratic education as articulated in earlier chapters. Without much more on issues facing so-called developing countries in postcolonial settings, Wane’s chapter feels strangely isolated and almost an add-on (although the issues loom large on the world stage).

In the fourth section on teaching for and about democracy, the particular effectiveness of this book for teacher education is highlighted. Resistance among candidate teachers to learn about and address social justice issues is addressed (Heidi Huse) as well as the importance of teaching them skills to resolve differences and work through conflict (Georg Lind). A discussion on curricular approaches to citizenship education (Suzanne Vincent & Jacques Désautels) and pedagogies based on dialogue, critical engagement and discussion are identified as key strategies to foster democracy education especially in multicultural contexts (Shazia Shujah). Beverly-Jean Daniel and Patrick Solomon, through a study on pre-service teachers as they move from theory to practice, provide further insights on how democratic education can be integrated into teacher preparation. The research contributions of these authors are wide-ranging and make a sound case for this critical aspect of bringing democracy education into the heart of teacher education.

If there were a wish list attached to this book it would be for a more in-depth foregrounding of Indigenous frameworks for democratic life as is reflected briefly in Price’s chapter, and for more alternative practices and commentaries from the Global South/ Majority World (addressed by Wane’s chapter) where class, socio-economic and other power structures both constrain democracy and democracy education, as well as producing resistance and liberatory movements. To what degree does democratic engagement and participation matter in these
diverse contexts, and does this have a bearing on democratic education? These and other questions to be explored in the next installment.

The book, published four years ago, is still very useful and relevant for the university/college classroom (teacher education in particular) in the context of new and emerging grassroots democracy movements as it offers both a conceptual entry point into the discussion about fostering democratic engagement among young people and the greater community, and more importantly, many illustrations of the ‘doing’ of democracy. We need a dynamic framework that reflects the very principles of equity and social justice that we strive for and Doing Democracy lives up to its promise of providing a rich and in-depth discussion of a range of issues relating to democracy education in our complex times.