

Diana E. Hess & Paula McAvoy (2015). *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*. New York: Routledge.

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Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy's book, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, succeeds in offering an ethical framework for the discussion of political topics in the classroom and provides practical insights both for educators who are new to in-class political discussions and for more experienced instructors who wish to revise/refine their pedagogical praxis. The authors argue that their book is unique because it "integrates social science research with philosophical thinking about ethical issues of teacher practice" (p. 9). This brief text contains a justification for the necessity of political classrooms, three case studies, and an ethical framework for democratic education. Their research and conclusions are compelling, but critics may find that Hess and McAvoy fail to adequately address issues of power and justice.

Both Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy are former high school social studies teachers. Hess is now Dean of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin, and McAvoy – who received her doctorate from that program in 2010 – is now Program Director at The Center for Ethics and Education. Since the publication of this book, Hess and McAvoy have traveled the nation to give talks and facilitate professional development workshops hosted by the likes of Harvard University and the American Educational Research Association.

Hess and McAvoy's recommendations are relatively pragmatic and rooted in a liberal tradition of educational philosophy (e.g., Dahl, 2015; Levinson, 2012). For them, a political classroom is a rational, deliberative classroom where students wrestle with controversial issues and are taught to "weigh evidence, consider competing views, form an opinion, articulate that opinion, and respond to those who disagree" (p. 5). The case studies contained within the text feel realistic and relatable, but they are neither as inspiring nor as transformational as cases collected by authors such as Apple and Beane (2007). Hess and McAvoy seem most comfortable advocating for a view of citizenship which aligns with Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) participatory citizen – one who engages in collective, community-based efforts but may not question underlying inequities or seek systemic change. The most significant contribution the authors make is their ethical framework for democratic educators

which posits that "professional judgment requires teachers to consider the *context* in which they teach, the available *evidence*, and their educational *aims* (p. 12, emphasis in original).

The book is separated into three sections: context and aims of the political classroom, case studies, and ethics of professional judgment. In the first section, Hess and McAvoy seek to offer a justification for the need of a political classroom, which is an educational environment that wrestles with the "political education paradox" – a paradox which "contrasts the need to provide students with a nonpartisan political education on the one hand with the need to prepare them to participate in the highly partisan political community on the other" (p. 4). Hess and McAvoy see increasing political polarization as a defining challenge for the nation and educators, and many of their recommendations seek to counter this trend. They point to increased segregation among school populations and the implementation of tracking as factors that challenge democratic education. Hess and McAvoy's assessment of the current state of education is sober and accurate but not without hope, and readers will find within these pages rich information to use when justifying their democratically engaged work.

The data collected for this text reflected an ambitious effort. Researchers embarked on a four-year study of student civic engagement to understand which classroom practices best fostered civic participation. Participants included more than one thousand students and 35 teachers in 21 schools across three states. What did the researchers find to be most effective? A classroom environment which Hess and McAvoy call "best practice discussion" where students engage in "discussion of controversial political issues more than 20% of the time" and spend significant amounts of time talking to each other rather than talking to the teacher (p. 47). Unfortunately, Hess and McAvoy missed an opportunity by not including any service-learning courses into their sample, and I cannot help but wonder how service-learning would have compared to discussion-centered classes. Hess and McAvoy note that their idea of a political classroom is just one approach to democratic education and is distinct from service-learning. But must service-learning and

classroom discussion be mutually exclusive? The answer is clearly no.

Inspired by Dewey, Hess and McAvoy believe that democracy is a way of life and that the central question for a political classroom is “How should we live together?” (p. 77). The authors argue that the democratic aims which should be fostered within students include political equality, tolerance, autonomy, fairness, political engagement, and political literacy. This commendable, albeit innocuous, list of values differs greatly from those of George Counts (1932/1978) – a contemporary of Dewey – who argued that, among other things, educators should prepare citizens to “combat all forces tending to produce social distinctions and classes; repress every form of privilege and economic parasitism;” and as a last resort be prepared to “follow the method of revolution” (pp. 37-38). Hess and McAvoy have thus chosen a liberal pragmatism and moderation which may be unsatisfactory for some scholars of critical pedagogy.

In the second section of their book, Hess and McAvoy turn to three case studies which serve to illustrate best examples of democratic classrooms which center on student-led discussion. Most compelling from this section are the strategies teachers used in like-minded schools, which the authors identify as schools with a high ideological coherence among students. The need for strategies to inject controversial discussions has become more pronounced for educators as resegregation and tracking continue to create homogenous learning environments. We thus face increasing challenges to expose students to difference and disagreement in our classrooms, and the cases included in this book offer educators several strategies to counteract the effects of a like-minded student population and promote greater intellectual diversity.

In the final section of the book, Hess and McAvoy elaborate upon their ethical framework. They provide a useful graphic to explain how evidence, aims, and context can be used to influence professional judgment, and they offer an insightful method of considering what topics educators allow to be discussed in class. The authors argue that two types of questions can be asked: empirical or policy. Empirical questions can be answered with evidence while policy questions require more than evidence to be answered, meaning they often contain a moral component. Either type of question can be settled or open, meaning it has been decided or is currently controversial, respectively. For example, some teachers may no longer allow the topic of gay marriage to be debated in class because they view it as a settled issue since the

Supreme Court ruled it constitutional. For those educators, the policy question of gay marriage is settled, but others may still see it as open because many within society strive to undermine marriage equality. Hess and McAvoy are therefore less interested in *what* is decided (whether marriage equality is an open or settled topic) and more interested in *how* the decision is reached. Rather than advocating a one-size-fits-all approach to classroom decisions, the authors succeed in offering frameworks which can help teachers make personal decisions which are appropriate to their particular aims and context.

Ultimately, *The Political Classroom* offers modest, practical guidance for education professionals who want to incorporate or improve political discussions in their repertoire of classroom activities. Some critics may be unsatisfied with Hess and McAvoy’s conception of a democratic classroom centered in overly rational discourse and student discussion which is devoid of service-learning and which may not tackle root causes of systemic inequalities. However, readers will be rewarded with a lucid, well-developed ethical framing of classroom decisions that provides us with a vocabulary we can use to assess our choices while recognizing the limits we all face in achieving our educational aims. Contained within *The Political Classroom*, readers will find an accessible guide to real-world applications for classroom discussions which promote civic literacy, civic participation, and democratic deliberation.

References

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