Democratic Teaching

An Incomplete Job Description

Rachel Bradshaw

Abstract

The importance of public education in democratic states is almost beyond dispute. Too often, though, discussions of democratic education focus solely on policies and systems, forgetting the individual teachers who are ultimately responsible for educating future citizens. This paper attempts to illustrate just how complex and significant the role of teachers in a democratic republic can be.

Submit a response to this article

Submit online at democracyeducationjournal.org/home

Read responses to this article online

http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss2/9

I recently watched the 2011 film *American Teacher*, which aims to raise awareness about the plight of primary and secondary public school teachers in the United States. Its diagnosis of the problem is simple enough: Teachers do too much work for too little pay. The documentary shows teachers exhausted from working 60- and 70-hour weeks, teachers working second jobs to support their "teaching habit," teachers forced to leave the profession for a job that will provide for their families. These situations are tragic, and raising awareness of them is worthwhile. But the film's most important point is one it hardly touches upon.

Rhena Jasey is the only American teacher who emphasizes the "intellectual rigor" of her profession. She points out that teachers must make "thousands of decisions every moment—not about abstract concepts but about children's lives." She explains that presenting complex ideas and information in ways that are comprehensible to young minds is a profoundly demanding task. And she cites the refrain, too familiar to many of us: "Anyone can teach, but you have an Ivy League education. You could do anything. Why become a teacher?"

When people ask this question, they are not implying that we should find a job with shorter hours: Many Ivy Leaguers work 20-hour days as consultants. They are not implying that we should avoid drudgery: Many Ivy Leaguers put themselves through graduate school by grading exams and serving lattes by the thousand. They are not even implying that we should earn more money: Many Ivy Leaguers take $20,000-a-year jobs at publishing houses or as adjunct professors. No, what the puzzled question suggests is that we should find a job that is intellectually fulfilling—and that teaching is not that.

If this phenomenon resulted only in the mild discomfort of an overprivileged few, it would hardly be worth mentioning. But the misconception it illustrates—that teaching is not an intellectual endeavor—threatens the very foundations of our political system.

To observe that democracy relies upon education is commonplace. Less frequently articulated are the ways in which democracy relies specifically upon teachers and teaching. No matter how thoughtful and thorough our curricula, policies, or procedures, democratic education ultimately takes place between teachers and students. It is teachers who must navigate what Brann (1989) calls

Rachel Bradshaw is a doctoral fellow studying K-12 education leadership and policy at Boston University. She graduated from Yale University with an undergraduate degree in English before earning a master's degree in education from Harvard University. Before going back to school full-time, she taught high school English, humanities, and debate classes and served as a policy debate coach in Boston Public Schools.

the "paradoxes of education in a republic." These are difficulties that cannot be resolved in the abstract or codified out of existence but instead require careful and continual management by those who face them every day.

American Teacher does allude in certain subtle ways to the possibility of seeing teaching as more than hard labor or charity work. In comparing United States teachers to those in higher-achieving countries, it mentions not only that the latter are better paid but also that they are an elite group and respected as such. The founder of The Equity Project, the New York charter school that pays its teachers upwards of $125,000 a year, notes in his interview that "if you pay teachers more, you change the perception of what it means to be a teacher" (i.e., that higher salaries may be necessary but are certainly not sufficient to recruit and retain highly skilled educators). But on the whole, the film's portrait of teachers invites more pity than awe.

Yet democracy's teachers must be more than martyrs. Public school teachers in the United States today teach about democracy, with democracy, for democracy, in democracy, outside democracy—even before and after and during democracy. Indeed, almost any English preposition can fill in the blank, and to gloss over the complexities of teaching _____ democracy is to undermine both teaching and democracy. This paper therefore commits to struggling with those complexities in all their frustrating untidiness.

The sections below attempt to illustrate three major elements of democratic education: popular control over schooling, student voice and choice in schools, and tolerance of differences. The goal here is not to define these (admittedly nebulous) concepts theoretically; rather, it is to begin—barely!—the task of describing just what it is we need from our nation's teachers.

Popular Control of Schooling

Consider first the position of teachers *in* a democracy. They are public servants, for (at least in theory) our schools are subject to democratic control. At first glance this ideal seems to relieve them of a great burden: In order to further our society's democratic ideals, they need only do whatever their communities ask of them. If the populace wants them to teach evolution, they teach it. If it votes for a creationist curriculum, so be it. After all, as Gutmann (1987) reminds us, "Being an expert in education is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for claiming authority over education in a democracy" (p. 80). Local businesses, universities, elected officials, and especially parents all have stakes in the future of their community and its children. If proper democratic procedures are in place, many difficult decisions about how to educate children can be settled by votes, meetings, and other means of ensuring popular control over schooling. Perhaps educators themselves need worry only about technical questions of how best to teach the knowledge and skills valued by the community.

Difficulties arise almost immediately, however. Most obvious is the fact that our democracy is a constitutional one, designed explicitly to make impossible a "tyranny of the majority." Gutmann (1987) herself defines *democracy* as majoritarian rule constrained by the twin principles of nonrepression and nondiscrimination—constraints far from trivial and ones to which I will return below in a discussion of tolerance and pluralism. A teacher must have the knowledge and capacity to eschew repression and discrimination no matter what any school board or parent-teacher association says. This is not only a matter of preserving citizens' rights in the present but also a way of protecting the future, as Gutmann (1987) makes clear:

> *If democracy did not extend over time, we might best discover what a community values on any particular occasion by collective deliberation followed by unconstrained majority rule. The temporal dimension of democracy requires us to ask whether the results of majority rule make future decisions undemocratic either by restricting citizens' capacity for deliberation in the future or by excluding some citizens from full participation in future deliberations. (pp. 95–96)*

Perhaps this task is formulaic enough: Teachers should heed the demands of their communities, unless those demands violate anyone's constitutional rights, in which case the latter take precedence. As long as laws and procedures are legitimate, teachers need only defer to them in order to ensure that the education they provide is democratic.

But that would be too easy. Here is Gutmann (1987) again:

> *When democratic control over primary [and secondary] schools is so absolute as to render teachers unable to exercise intellectual discretion in their work, (1) few independent-minded people are attracted to teaching, (2) those who are attracted are frustrated in their attempts to think creatively and independently, and (3) those who either willingly or reluctantly conform to the demands of democratic authority teach an undemocratic lesson to their students—of intellectual deference to democratic authority. (p. 80)*

In other words, teachers who focus too much on teaching *in* democracy might fail to teach *for* democracy—to prepare their students to be independent-minded citizens of the sort essential to the maintenance of a healthy democratic state. As Moe (2000) puts it, "This is one of the ironies of democracy: the schools have difficulty contributing to the quality of democratic government precisely because they are democratically controlled" (p. 142).

There is no escaping from this conundrum, for it goes without saying that tyranny is as undesirable as demagoguery—that teachers who ignore the voices of their communities or violate their students' constitutional rights are no more democratic than those enslaved to popular opinion.

> *This is why every teacher of democratic citizens stands . . . in the methoria. The responsibility to teach places the teacher between the consensus of his or her age and the unknown future. . . . Thus, the teacher must construct the space of the pedagogic between the ideals and the vocabulary and self-understanding of the given society. (Steiner, 1994, p. 124)*

In short, neither teaching *in* democracy nor teaching *for* democracy can be sacrificed. A teacher must have the intellectual, social, and ethical agility necessary to balance these two functions, never losing sight of either even when they seem directly opposed

to each other. With this requirement comes another: to avoid eternal battles of conscience and will between self and community, a teacher must not only balance contrary interests but also bring them into dialogue with each other. After all, our democracy is not only representative but also deliberative, dependent not only on the vote but also on debate, persuasion, and consensus building. Again, Steiner's (1994) grandiloquence is perhaps not unwarranted: "The community must be persuaded of the fallibility of its own judgment, of the responsibility of its educators to broker the difference between its self-understanding and the silences, the blindness, which that self-understanding has induced" (p. 124).

Thus, the democratic principle of allowing communities input into their children's education, far from relieving teachers of responsibility for making controversial decisions, instead requires that they both respect the decisions of others and model autonomous decision making for pupils who will one day be deciding the fate of their own communities and children. No theory can determine when each of these tasks should take precedence over the other; only human ingenuity and sensitivity will suffice. It is the teacher, not the procedure or the rule, that makes education democratic—or not.

Student Voice and Choice

Thus far the teacher job description includes someone adept at balancing the constitutional, procedural, and deliberative aspects of democracy: someone with acute sensitivity to discriminatory and repressive practices, someone who understands the demands of the community being served, and someone skilled at communicating personal values and justifying professional practices when they challenge public opinion (as in some cases they should, if the teacher is to guard effectively against the "tyranny of the majority"). But the above discussion may have implied that teaching *for* democracy—that is, preparing students to be good citizens—is a relatively simple task once one learns how to manage teaching *in* democracy. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For one thing, even the verb *preparing* is problematic. Steiner (1994) claims that "education, for Dewey, is about the preparation of citizens who will engage in the constant reconstruction of the public sphere" (p. 129), but Dewey would presumably object to Steiner's use of the future tense here. Dewey (1974) sees education as "a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (p. 430). He says, "The process and goal of education are one and the same thing" (p. 434), and any education whose *telos* lies outside itself is no education at all. Dewey is emphatic on this point, which he sees as the very crux of education reform. The futile attempt "to prepare future members of the social order in a medium" set entirely apart from that order constitutes "the tragic weakness of the present school" (p. 301). That is why, once his vision is realized, school will no longer be "so set apart, so isolated from the ordinary conditions and motives of life" (p. 302); it will instead be "a miniature community, an embryonic society" (p. 303). Brann (1989) observes that "the question whether educational institutions should be isolated from, or extensions of, 'life,' is of great importance in the pedagogy of a republic" (p. 45). Dewey, it seems, would not hesitate in choosing the latter option.

If he is right, then students should be citizens and not subjects of their schools, which must be democratic institutions if they are to teach students how to function in the larger democracy that is society. Teaching *for* democracy must not entail teaching *outside of* or *prior to* some other democratic existence; the pedagogical act must instead embody authentic democracy in the here and now.

Again it seems at first glance that democracy takes a great deal of pressure off the individual teacher. Perhaps all that is required of teachers is that they respond to the needs expressed by their students. After all, serving the populace in true democratic fashion precludes imposing one's own will on it. Constitutional provisions for the protection of minorities still apply, of course: If a group of students votes to steal one child's lunch money and share it among themselves, their teacher must intervene, limiting democracy for its own sake by upholding Gutmann's principles of nonrepression and nondiscrimination. Nevertheless, the rule seems clear enough. Defer to procedural democracy unless it flouts constitutional democracy, and the education you provide will be appropriate.

At least two objections present themselves, however. First, procedural democracy is hardly a monolithic force in itself. What happens, for instance, if students' wishes contradict their parents'? Whom are teachers to serve, and how can they serve either or both without, as above, failing to model the personal autonomy their students need to learn in order to contribute to and benefit from the democracy in which they live? Second, students are by definition not yet qualified to be citizens. Children neither vote nor serve on juries because society deems them incapable of fulfilling such responsibilities; how, then, are teachers to treat them as fully competent decisionmakers?

It may be said that the decisions students make in schools do not have such weighty consequences as those a voter or juror makes—that deciding what to study or what game to play is precisely a way to practice, in a low-stakes setting, the skills students will need in the future. It turns out, though, that classrooms are terribly high-stakes environments. In a commentary on *The Social Contract* (1762),[1] Steiner (1994) observes:

> *On the issue of openness Rousseau would be amused by the contemporary exhortation to allow "students and teachers to negotiate which courses, if any, are to be required." This, in Rousseau's view, would be to expect students to judge the quality of a knowledge they had yet to encounter. The product of such an education would not be freedom but, instead, its reverse: children incapable of delayed gratification, of schooling their impulses or accumulating knowledge. (p. 192)*

That is, "the same principle that requires a state to grant adults personal and political freedom also commits it to assuring children an education which makes those freedoms both possible and meaningful" (Gutmann, 1987; qtd. in Steiner, 1994, p. 11). Thus, teachers who make their students sovereign over their own learning in an excess of democratic fervor may undermine their own efforts to teach _____ democracy by ultimately constraining their students' ability to take advantage of their democratic freedoms. Put differently, "the pedagogical problem is how to protect the spontaneity of genuine thinking and prevent abdication to experts while developing

the competence to gauge and use the experts' competence with some authority" (Brann, 1989, p. 127). Here then is yet another balancing act required of teachers by democracy: they must be authorities on how to challenge authority, experts on how to question expertise—teachers of both future citizens and present-day pseudocitizens, people who must exist before, during, inside, and outside democracy all at once. It is a "pedagogical problem" indeed.

It is worth noting that more than the future happiness of children is at stake. First, Steiner (1994) explains:

> *Protagoras challenged the earliest citizens to find in themselves and their experience the measure of all things. But his invitation is fraught with difficulty. How can such citizens educate themselves to measure more effectively? If the standard against which citizens are to hold their judgments is a mirror, how might one give a public definition of that standard? If every citizen is a sovereign measurer, what role remains for a class of educators? (p. 184)*

Given the limitations of children, the student-teacher relationship is even more problematic than the citizen-sophist one Steiner describes. Teachers must challenge their students to think for themselves, but they must do so without renouncing their own authority as adults and as educators. Otherwise, they teach themselves out of a job, calling into question the very existence of their profession. Further, quoting Rousseau, Steiner (1994) asks,

> *"How will a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wants because it rarely knows what is good for it, carry out for itself an undertaking as vast and difficult as a system of legislation" (Social Contract, p. 67)? Citizens cannot simply rely on the wisdom of their compatriots, for this would be expecting the impossible: "men would have to be prior to laws what they ought to become by means of the law" (p. 69). (p. 117)*

The passage could be rephrased (and stripped of its rather antidemocratic sentiment!) by pointing out that, given too much power over their own schooling, students would have to be prior to education what they ought to become by means of that education. If a student is high-achieving enough to be placed in an advanced track but would rather stay in lower-level classes, how does that student's teacher best serve democratic purposes? Does the teacher defer to the student's interests or encourage the child to "fulfill his potential"? It is up to the teacher neither to assume preexisting decision-making competence nor neglect to develop that competence in the children the teacher leads. If the teacher fails on either count, democracy itself will fail, for people doomed to "blindness" will never succeed at governing themselves.

Local control over educational agendas, student voice and choice in schools, abhorrence of discrimination and repression, the value of thinking for oneself—every educator in the country must be acutely aware of all these aspects of the role as a teacher _____ democracy. It is upon teachers' everyday practice, upon the continual negotiations and adaptations without which they cannot manage their paradoxical role in society, that the strength of our democracy hinges. In short, the system does not create the pedagogy; the pedagogy creates the system.

Teaching Tolerance

Thus far the constitutional aspects of democracy have appeared largely as prohibitions against wrongdoing. Teachers can focus on the more technical aspects of their jobs as long as they avoid violating anyone's rights, one might think. When Gutmann defines the nonprocedural aspects of democracy in negative terms—as *non*repression and *non*discrimination—she echoes a long tradition of "live and let live" rhetoric that in this country dates back at least as far as Thomas Jefferson. Take, for instance, Jefferson's arguments for keeping religious dogma out of the public schools. For him, religion is private, government is public, and these facts are reasons enough to keep them apart. "I have ever thought religion a concern purely between our God and our consciences" (1816, para. 1), he explains, and "our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry" (1786, para. 1). Further, "the legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg" (1787, Query XVII, para. 2). From a public school teacher's point of view, all of this suggests that the teacher need not and should not worry about students' religious or other beliefs unless they actively cheat or hurt other students. For Jefferson, though, this last caveat is unnecessary. Why would disagreements about the number of gods ever have the power to harm anyone?

The answer, of course, is that religious (and other) debates are rarely so circumscribed. They are not only abstract discussions of whether the Trinity is one god in three or three gods in one; they are often fundamental disagreements over the most concrete aspects of our private and public lives: how to dress at school, whom to date or marry, what to eat in whose company. When one student in a classroom holds forth on the sinfulness of abortion and homosexuality, for instance, in the presence of a student who has had an abortion and another who is gay, then taking a hands-off approach may actually cause psychological harm to the listeners or impede their ability to learn. A teacher's silence may be interpreted as an abdication of responsibility to educate all children rather than as strict attention to duties as a representative of the government. This danger is perhaps greater now that our society is much more diverse than it once was, but I would venture to propose that even in Jefferson's time religious debates could be fairly personal affairs. It is difficult to see how simply ignoring students' religious opinions—or their differences in general—could ever have been a simple or fail-safe option for any public school teacher.

Indeed there is a certain disturbing thread of apathy, of civic disengagement, running through Jefferson's writing. He claims he "never yet saw an instance of one of two disputants convincing the other by argument" (1808, para. 1). Of course, the careful and sympathetic reader will conclude that he is warning only against angry dispute, not against reasoned debate. A few sentences later, though, he touts Benjamin Franklin's stated policy of never contradicting anyone and adds:

> *When I hear another express an opinion, which is not mine, I say to myself, He has a right to his opinion, as I to mine; why should I question it. His error does me no injury, and shall I become a Don Quixot to bring all men by force of argument, to one opinion? If a fact be misstated, it is probable he is gratified by a belief of it, and I have no right to deprive him of the gratification. . . . It is his affair, not mine, if he prefers error. (para. 1)*

Here is a sublime level of tolerance, an attitude that would improve many a classroom and society. But it is what Pangle and Pangle (2000) call "a tolerance that is a 'mere' toleration: a thin pluralism of coexisting but mutually indifferent or hostile multicultural posturings" (p. 24). Their diagnosis is this:

> *The balances delicately articulated in our original, founding public philosophy have been decisively tilted: rights have eclipsed responsibilities, freedom has obscured virtue, tolerance has rendered suspicious the passing of moral judgments, and concern for autonomous choice has come to outweigh concern for human fulfillment found in dedication and devotion. (p. 23)*

All of this translates into yet another delicate balancing act required of teachers in the United States today. On the one hand, they must heed Jefferson's warnings against embarking on quixotic quests to convert the world to their own beliefs. On the other hand, open-minded teaching must mean more than condescending to humor those who are doomed to "error." There are ways to teach without dogma, to tolerate without indifference. Jefferson once struggled to define such strategies in theory; educators must struggle every day to define them in practice. Otherwise, they risk teaching only apathy or resentment.

What these texts and others give teachers are not rules; they are guidelines that require continual interpretation and adaptation in ever-changing contexts. Like democratic control over schools and democratic training within schools, tolerance of pluralism requires individual teachers capable and aware enough to make an unending series of tough decisions about how best to educate _____ democracy.

Conclusions and Implications

Steiner (1994) is admirably forthright on the subject of translating theory into practice:

> *What all theorists implicitly hope for (present company included) is a process of benign trickle-down. Those who make education their profession are, through some mysterious symbiotic process, to be made aware of our ideas and understand how and when to modify them for practical use. (p. 198)*

He knows of course that the "mysterious symbiotic process" cannot be carried out by anyone but teachers themselves. Thus his conclusion, which follows pages and pages of confidently worded abstractions, is replete with phrases like "teachers would be free to select . . ." (1994, p. 201), "the teacher may judge . . ." (p. 203), "as ever, it is the teacher who will negotiate the tension . . ." (p. 205), "only the individual . . . teacher can gauge . . ." (p. 205), and "teachers should be free to select . . ." (p. 209). In the end there is no escaping the obvious: all the negotiating, all the balancing and compromising and juggling—all the complexity democracy demands of its educational systems—all this is manifest nowhere more clearly than in everyday interactions between individual teachers and their students.

Of course, teachers need not bear sole responsibility for the vitality of our democracy. The goal of this paper is to recognize the challenges teachers face, not to increase them. Non-teachers too must play a role: distributing resources, promulgating mission statements, designing administrative structures, holding school board elections, establishing student governments, developing curricula, engaging families and communities, writing laws, enforcing regulations—all these are important and indeed indispensible aspects of public education in a democratic republic. But they are also insufficient. Administrators, policymakers, and curriculum designers can help design democratic education systems, but they cannot ensure democratic *teaching*. Only teachers can do that.

Thus, teacher training programs must recruit and educate candidates capable of rising to all the challenges of teaching _____ democracy. School administrators must support and demand acuity and discernment, not drudgery or self-sacrifice, from their faculty members. Policymakers must understand how pedagogy interacts with policy in the realm of democratic education. Most of all, though, teachers must understand just how important they are.

Notes

1. See T*he Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right*, available online at http://www.constitution.org/jjr/socon.htm

References

Brann, E. (1989). *Paradoxes of education in a republic*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.

Dewey, J. (1974). *On education: Selected writings*. R. D. Archambault (Ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.

Gutmann, A. (1987). *Democratic education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.

Jefferson, T. (1786). The Virginia act for establishing religious freedom. Retrieved from http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/vaact.html

Jefferson, T. (1787). Notes on the state of Virginia. Retrieved from http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/jeffvir.asp

Jefferson, T. (1808, November 24). [Letter to Thomas Jefferson Randolph]. Retrieved from http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl187.php

Jefferson, T. (1816, August 6). [Letter to Mrs. Samuel H. Smith]. Retrieved from http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl247.php

Moe, T. M. (2000). The two democratic purposes of public education. In L. M. McDonnell, P. M. Timpane, & R. Benjamin (Eds.), *Rediscovering the democratic purposes of education* (pp. 127–147). Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas.

Pangle, L. S., & Pangle, T. L. (2000). What the American Founders have to teach us about schooling for democratic citizenship. In L. M. McDonnell, P. M. Timpane, & R. Benjamin (Eds.), *Rediscovering the democratic purposes of education* (pp. 21–46). Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas.

Roth, V., & McGinn, B. (Directors). (2011). *American teacher* [Motion picture]. United States.

Steiner, D. (1994). *Rethinking democratic education.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.