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What Is Democratic Education and Why Should We Care?

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Democratic education is central to the functioning and flourishing of modern multicultural democracies, and yet it is subject to increasing public controversy and political pressure. Waning public trust in government institutions (Miner, 2020; Stitzlein, 2020; Wilson, 2020; cf. MacDonald, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2022), sustained attacks on democratic values and customs from populist politicians and organizations (Brown, 2019; Müller, 2016, 2021; Runciman, 2019), political polarization and "sectarianism" (Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019), and increasing trends toward privatization and chartering in the educational landscape (Abrams, 2016; Levin, 2001; Verger et al., 2016) have placed immense strain on the existing structures of public education and generally worked to undermine public confidence in democratic education. Practically speaking, this has meant that educators have been thrust into hazardous pedagogical terrain, in which students and parents are increasingly empowered to opt out of course content and evaluations on political grounds (Wilson, 2020), while teachers are expected to maintain scrupulous neutrality on politically and morally controversial issues, regardless of the intellectual merit of the opinions involved, or else face charges of indoctrination (Hand, 2008; Zimmermann & Robertson, 2017). This contentious educational atmosphere has made it increasingly difficult to foster cooperation, rational discussion and a sense of political community in students beyond partisan political divisions (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

At the same time, several movements in educational and political theory have called some of the basic concepts, premises, and normative justifications of democratic education into question. According to the most critical of these perspectives, we should seriously reconsider the status of democratic education as an educational ideal and recognize its intrinsically hegemonic, bourgeois, or oppressive character. While in some cases these thoroughgoing critiques have led to important advancements in our understanding of democratic theory – for example, in our growing awareness of how power, racism, xenophobia, nationalism, and sexism have historically influenced political and educational

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theory-building – in other cases they have seemed to authorize anti-democratic or autocratic impulses under the auspices of academic scholarship.

In light of these developments, it seems to us to be of central importance to return to the basic concepts, theories, and values of democratic education, both as a social ideal and a political institution. Of course, "democratic education" has been defined in almost as many ways as its constitutive terms, "democracy" and "education," and we do not want to enter this particular debate in this introductory chapter (see, for instance, Brighouse, 1998; Brumlik, 2018; Callan, 1997; Gutmann, 1999; Kitcher, 2022; Merry, 2018; Reichenbach, 2022). Rather, we would like to make a brief case for democratic education as a core focus of educational theory and practice – that is, for *caring* about democratic education in a profound way.

In the first place, democratic education, in its broadest sense, expresses what we hope will result from our efforts to educate the next generation. Caring about democratic education means that, whatever curricular materials or pedagogical methods may be used in the process, we hope that our educational institutions are contributing to producing a happier and more flourishing society. At the individual level, this means that we hope students come out the other end of their education prepared to see themselves as worthy and able to participate in democratic decision-making, to uphold democratic ideals in their social and vocational lives, and to be prepared to protect the integrity and stability of democratic processes if they are threatened. Democratic education is, in other words, education *for* democracy (cf. Sant, 2019). It takes seriously the belief that human communities and individuals flourish most, or become the most just, when they commit to a basic principle of equality among all human beings and when they keep opportunities and social roles open to all those who strive to achieve them. To this end, education for democracy cultivates not only the will and ability to enact this basic principle in a comprehensive way, but also an active consciousness of historical injustices, so that the enduring effects of oppression, marginalization and demoralization can be counteracted and, ultimately, neutralized.

If caring about democratic education means enacting an education for democracy, then this implies something important about what democratic education looks like in practice. Democracy is not only a formal characteristic of political or educational institutions, but also an attitude toward our fellow human beings. Crucially, although this attitude may in some cases arise naturally in individuals, it is nonetheless in tension with other widespread and psychologically powerful human motivations and tendencies – for example, avarice, competitiveness, or the desire for power. Developing the ability to recognize our fundamental moral equality with other human beings, to make this recognition psychologically effective enough in our actions and decisions that it can overcome countervailing impulses, and to draw on this principle for strength when democratic ideals are challenged requires a rigorous and thoroughgoing educational program that creates democratically oriented habits, dispositions and virtues in students. In order to supply this comprehensive educational experience, democratic education will have to occur across the curriculum, in physical

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education, mathematics, and biology just as much as in social studies or civics. This insight prevents us from outsourcing the demands of citizen formation to one disciplinary location. It makes the concept of democratic education importantly different from terms like "civic education" or "political education," which focus more exclusively on the particular knowledge and skills necessary for effective participation in contemporary political processes.

Democratic education not only implies an education for democracy, but also that this education is *conducted* in a certain kind of way. Imagine a program designed to instill democratic habits and virtues that was taught in an authoritarian manner, allowing little to no room for students' own experiences and personalities and with harsh punishment schemes in place. Clearly, such an approach to "democratic education" would be a performative contradiction. However, the same goes for educational programs that too starkly individualize students, making education centrally a matter of individuals earning grades, accolades, credentials, and other forms of social recognition for their own personal advancement. John Dewey pointed out at the turn of the twentieth century that we seriously undermine the potential to cultivate and achieve democracy through our schools if we make education so individual an affair. The example he uses is the quintessential exam experience. What happens during exams? Students sit in individual desks, call up objective, impersonal knowledge to answer the standardized questions posed, remain quiet and still while they do so, and turn in their work at the end for an individual grade. If they decide – in the spirit of democracy – to communicate with each other and work together, perhaps even to help the weakest students improve their academic abilities, they are punished, sometimes with expulsion. Dewey urged us to ask ourselves, What could be more devastating for cultivating democratic sentiments and habits?

If we care about democracy and a truly democratic education, then this will not do. What counts as a characteristically democracy-promoting pedagogy, then? Dewey famously thought it was provided by the intrinsic "social control" of rich practical activities like cooking, sewing, woodwork, and gardening, and this is why these occupations made up the bulk of the school day at his laboratory school. In contrast, A. S. Neill thought it meant the almost complete forfeiture of curricular and educational decision-making power to students, particularly in an assembly-style structure composed of them and their teachers. Harold Rugg, a colleague of Dewey's and a fellow progressive, thought that "parliamentary discussion" of controversial social issues should form the core of the democratic educational experience. Freire thought, too, that only a thoroughly dialogical pedagogy would suffice, though it should be one in which students' home lives become the topic of instruction, particularly, the manifold ways in which oppression colors their experience. Countless further proposals have been made since these classic positions were staked out. Recently, programs that bring in important global issues and cosmopolitan perspectives have gained in popularity.

This is not the place to take a stand on this question, though it does seem to us that some combination of each of these elements would likely be necessary for

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providing a comprehensive democratic education. However, at a somewhat more general level, we can say that the two notions of democratic education – education *for* democracy and education *as* democracy (democratic pedagogy) – constitute two practical desiderata that limit and complement each other. For example, if we knew we could instill democratic qualities most efficiently by means of autonomy-denying methods, we would not want to do so because of our commitment to democratic pedagogy. On the other hand, if we allow democratic education to be too open-ended or student-centered in order to emulate the structures and procedures of democratic government in adulthood, then we fail to provide a compelling and effective education of sentiment and habit that furthers democratic flourishing (and personal flourishing, too). Indeed, not only would this prevent us from helping students develop democratic virtues; it inhibits us from counteracting anti-democratic influences in the larger culture – influences that shape students both outside and inside of schools every single day.

In light of this broad understanding of the importance and scope of democratic education, this handbook offers an expansive view of the formation of individuals for democratic life and includes theoretical traditions, topics, and thinkers that are not always immediately connected to this task when construed as civic, political, or citizenship education. More concretely, this volume provides readers with a comprehensive overview of the fundamental ideas, concepts, theories, aims and challenges of democratic education, both as a social ideal and as a contemporary institution. If educators are to provide students with a worthwhile and socially productive education within the current educational landscape, and if researchers are to understand the specific sociopolitical factors influencing the present educational moment, we believe that a broad engagement with the value and meaning of democratic education will be an indispensable resource to them. This volume will therefore not only introduce readers to the central contours of contemporary thinking about democratic education, but also function, we hope, as a clear signal of the practical and scholarly significance of democratic education. Given the current challenges to democratic education, we believe it to be an opportune time to send such a signal.

However, we believe that the reasons for compiling this *Cambridge Handbook of Democratic Education* go beyond the particularities of the present moment. Democratic education is a perennial concern of societies committed to the value of justice and the well-being of children. Debates about the meaning, purpose and aims of democratic education had already begun in Ancient Athens, in which the proper content of the *encyclios paideia* (general education) was vigorously disputed. On the one side, followers of Plato and Aristotle, though the two sages of Greek Antiquity expressed skepticism about democracy, defended the role of speculative and philosophically oriented studies for political formation, while followers of Isocrates and other sophists forcefully argued for public rhetoric and civic engagement as the prerequisite studies for democratic citizenship. This ancient debate has continued throughout Western history (Stasavage, 2020; Sen, 2005), with some educational thinkers taking the

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speculative, philosophical side and others the rhetorical side (Kimball, 1986). These issues became particularly poignant in the aftermath of the democratic revolutions in eighteenth-century Europe and America, in which it became apparent – to such figures as Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann in the American context, for example – that access to a democracy-promoting education should be free and open to all citizens (though often excluding women, African-Americans and other groups). The discussion of what kinds of subjects and what kinds of pedagogy are appropriate for such an educational program are thus not only important in the present political situation. This discussion is a mainstay of open and free societies. The debates and deliberations over the content, methods, and aims of democratic education can be seen as so many indications of a healthy democratic community, so long as they are conducted in a humane and constructive manner.

In this way, this volume aims to be an enduring resource for those interested in advancing the discussion of democratic education well into the future. Not only does the volume encompass several chapters on the history of democratic education, including analyses of some of the major historical figures who have contributed to the discussion; it also engages with some of the central concepts, ideas, and ideals that have wielded influence over the programs and theories of democratic education in history. We hope to encourage readers to return to these issues and thinkers as a part of their study of democratic education, since they continue to provide fresh insight for the project of understanding and realizing democratic education.

There are four main themes that organize the handbook into four parts: (i) Historical Perspectives, (ii) Philosophical and Normative Foundations, (iii) Key Topics and Concepts, and (iv) Challenges. In *Historical Perspectives*, we include chapters on significant figures in the history of political and educational thought who have contributed significantly to our understanding of democratic education and whose ideas warrant perennial reconsideration. In *Philosophical and Normative Foundations*, we provide chapters connecting democratic education to important foundational ideas in ethics, moral philosophy, as well as social and political philosophy broadly construed. This part is essential to the handbook, for it shows that the discussion of democratic education is connected in myriad ways to some of the central issues in contemporary political and educational thought, such as the emerging field of educational ethics, moral education, political liberalism, and critical theory. The part dedicated to *Key Topics and Concepts* takes up some of the central issues in the research on democratic education today. This part provides the reader with a broad and systematic overview of some of the most pressing theoretical and practical questions in democratic education, including classroom debate and dialogue, controversial issues, global justice, punishment, patriotism, and free speech. The final part of the handbook addresses *Challenges* to the project of democratic education today. This part looks not only at intellectual movements that have contested the basic principles and aims of democratic education, but also movements in the public realm, such as the rise of populist political organizations, the changing media terrain and climate change.

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With this thematic and conceptual orientation, we thus hope to have provided a distinctive and comprehensive treatment of democratic education, one that can serve as an enduring resource for researchers and practitioners who care about democratic education.

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