

*Educating Democratic Citizens in Troubled Times:  
Qualitative Studies of Current Efforts*  
Janet Bixby and Judith Pace, editors  
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### **Foreword**

This is an excellent and needed collection. When its editors, Janet Bixby and Judith Pace, invited me to write the foreword, I accepted knowing only that it would contain new and well-selected qualitative studies of democratic education. Now that I've read them, I want to recommend a close and comparative reading of each. Much is to be learned here about civic education in the U. S. today—both broadly (thanks to reading these studies as a set) and particularly (thanks to reading each one as a context-specific inquiry). Six themes are central: knowing about democracy and engaging in democracy, social context and identity formation, and curriculum and instruction for democracy. In each pair there is tension; each “and” can be replaced, for a different effect, with “versus.” Now, permit me to set the stage with a bit of personal and social history.

My working-class parents were members of the United Methodist Church in Englewood, Colorado; therefore, so were my sister and I. Such is the thrownness of life. None of us chooses the social contexts of our birth or the primary discourses that come with them because we have already been ‘thrown’ into them by the time we become aware of them. But my parents worried about provincialism. Caught up in the Roosevelt-era social-democratic liberalism that was still alive in post-war America (before its death at the hands of Thatcher and Reagan), they set about assembling a group of families who attended other Christian churches which, at least to my sister and I, were strangely different—Mormon, Baptist, and Catholic.

But they reached farther than ecumenism, for there were non-Christians too: other monotheists (a Jewish couple) plus polytheists (a Hindu couple) and nontheists (a Buddhist couple). As the initial exoticism of this experiment in grassroots multiculturalism subsided, the group became ordinary friends. The women were the primary glue: they gathered monthly at one another's homes to talk and sew (they referred to themselves as the ‘sewing group’). But the couples gathered now and then, too, and always celebrated New Year's Eve together. The children became friends, attending one another's birthday parties and gathering at the annual sewing-group picnic on Labor Day.

It was a thoroughly modern thing my parents did, for it assumed that their faith was but one of many. “Modern faith becomes reflexive,” Jürgen Habermas writes (2006, p. 152), “for it can only stabilize itself through self-critical awareness of the status it assumes within a universe of discourse restricted by secular knowledge and shared with other religions.” Modern society is characteristically self aware in this way, thus affording the possibility of pluralism, or the recognition and acceptance of diversity.

This modern reflexivity has important political consequences, not the least of which is the idea of the neutral, secular state. There was no more quick or effective solution to perpetual religious warfare among European states, recall, than the disestablishment of religion. But there is another political consequence: the spread of constitutional democracies. These are not merely electoral democracies in which citizens, via more-or-less free and fair elections, empower elected officials to administer society; they are also liberal democracies in which pluralism is accepted and civil liberties (the rights of women and minorities, for example) are protected by law—at least that’s the ideal and the basis for civil rights movements that struggle to realize it. Voting, then, is not the only form of popular political participation in a society that is trying to be a liberal democracy and certainly not the most demanding. There are other citizens with other viewpoints—ideological and cultural—and relating to them is part and parcel to creating, maintaining, and deepening the democratic project.

We arrive at a decentralized and discursive image of democratic life. On this model, democracy’s location is not mainly in the political system or what is colloquially (in the U.S.) called ‘the government’ or ‘politicians,’ but is distributed throughout society. Here is John Dewey’s conception of democracy as a “mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1985, p. 93). Here also is Danielle Allen’s (2004) argument that any utopian and anti-democratic notion of “oneness” must be given up as both false and illiberal—false because gross inequalities within U.S. society belie it (e.g., we have the most highly paid CEOs amid the highest rate of childhood poverty in the rich nations of the world) and illiberal because the idealization of oneness requires too much repression of difference and forces an assimilation model on the education system. Freed of the “oneness” ideal, popular sovereignty can be diversified and decentralized through political parties, cultural groups, unions, faculty meetings, faith communities, schools, social movements, the internet, book clubs, ball fields, and my parents’ sewing club. Citizens’ rights are secured not only by ‘the government’ but also by the efforts of fellow citizens. Citizens, therefore, have not only rights but obligations: to relate democratically to fellow citizens—to recognize, accept, and communicate with them—and to take some responsibility for nurturing this mode of associated living.

Powerful social forces compete with this communicative model of democracy, draining the associational highways and byways of the public sphere

of their potential for democratic education and mobilization. These include religious fundamentalism and other forms of aggressive monism, certainly, but also free-market fundamentalism (neoliberalism), which not only prevents serious attention to eliminating poverty but is in hock to a culture industry that manufactures mass somnolence. Each of these undercuts a citizen's political maturation, or what I've described as growth from "idiocy" to "puberty" (Parker, 2003). But there's another force: Even as liberal democracies increase in number and extend the franchise and civil rights to people previously denied them, this says nothing about what people *do* with them. Indeed, 'inclusion' is entirely mute about the active deployment of citizen powers by anyone.

The important and timely collection of studies in this volume speaks creatively to this problem space. Across an intriguing array of concerns and locations, it asks: How are citizens of the world's oldest liberal democracy, a nation now possessing unparalleled power, helped to understand and exercise citizen powers? What meanings of equality, politics, justice, democracy, difference, and now terrorism are they afforded, and how? To whom are they encouraged to speak and listen? What rationales are they given for engaging in political life? And in what range of settings does this education take place?

Thankfully, these are empirical studies. An educational endeavor filled with so many 'musts' and 'shoulds' and given to so many earnest exhortations begs for description, analysis, and explanation. Moreover, they are qualitative studies that offer thick, on-the-ground accounts of contemporary democratic education as it is practiced in particular—unique and contingent—circumstances. They deploy in one variation or another the scientific method of knowledge construction, of course, which has three anchors: evidence, plausible rival explanations, and public inspection. Perhaps readers will keep these three in mind as a way of interacting with the chapters. What kinds of data were gathered and why? What interpretations do the authors offer and with which plausible alternatives are they (or might they be) compared? As for the third, their claims and methods await your scrutiny.

Political scientists subsume political education within the concept 'political socialization' and therein are concerned mainly with what Amy Gutmann (1999) calls unconscious social reproduction. Educators by contrast are concerned to intervene in history and to intentionally shape society's future, not only to diagnose but also to remediate and transform; that is, they are concerned with conscious social reform. Accordingly, in these chapters we see the researchers' questions, methods, and findings along with their hope for a more vibrant democratic education. I share that hope.

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