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Democracy in the Classroom?

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Abstract

Democracy is a highly desirable but contested concept in education. However, little is known about how current and future educators perceive, experience and relate to democracy, which could have a significant impact on how students learn about, and become involved in, civic engagement and democracy. This paper reports on a study of 129 College of Education students, finding that they generally have a narrow conceptualization of democracy, primarily focused on electoral politics, only weakly connecting it to education. Social justice, in particular, was highlighted as requiring more attention.

Introduction

Educational systems and governments have become increasingly concerned with standards, accountability and high academic achievement, as evidenced by the *No Child Left Behind* legislation (Essex, 2006), but it is unclear how the concept, experience and reality of democracy is to be interwoven into the educational experience (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). In the debate on the purpose of education, some research has focused on the “decline of civic education and the willingness of young people to assume active citizenship roles” (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2005:1), or the disengagement from the formal political and voting process (Patterson, 2003). If there is agreement that democracy should somehow be cultivated and infused in education (Alexander, 1999), the evidence on how educators should do so is not abundant (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). This study explores the perspectives, experiences and perceptions of current and future educators, who are students at a university in Northeast Ohio, in relation to democracy in education. This research attempts to further our understanding of how educators conceptualize, experience and approach democracy, and, moreover, how this might frame how they teach about, influence, and engage in democracy, which will undoubtedly have an effect on students, inside and outside of the classroom.

Research Questions

- What are the perspectives, experiences and perceptions of College of education students in relation to democracy, especially within the educational context?
- What are the implications of how College of Education students perceive, construct and interact with democracy?
- How do current and future educators understand and relate to social justice within the context of democracy?

Research Sample and Methodology

The university at which the study was undertaken is an open-enrollment, state university in Ohio, with approximately 13,000 students who reside primarily in a five-county encatchment area. Many of the students represent the first generation in their families to attend university. This area has a significant African-American population, with the surrounding suburbs being predominantly White. Approximately 85% of the overall student body, and an even higher number in the College of Education, is White.

In November and December, 2005, approximately 400 College of Education students were asked to consider completing a detailed questionnaire containing 28 open- and closed-ended questions. Some 129 students ultimately completed the confidential questionnaire, including 114 undergraduate and 15 graduate students. The vast majority (91) of participants were less than 22 years old; 12 were 22-25 years of age; 4 were 26-30; 8 were 31-40; and 11 were 41 and older. Approximately twice as many respondents were female, and only 11 self-identified as African-American.

Data-Analysis

The data were analyzed through two distinct, but compatible, methods: 1) using quantitative software (SPSS), generating statistical analysis from responses provided using a 1 to 5 Likert scale; and 2) using a qualitative methodology to analyze and determine the strength, depth and meaning of responses, focusing on the students' open-ended answers.

In writing up the analysis, the following formula is used to identify quotations: a number, which assists us in separating data, followed by a letter, identifying whether the student is at the undergraduate or graduate level, followed by another letter indicating gender, and ending with a number, which categorizes the age of the respondent (1 = <22, 2 = 22-25, 3 = 26-30, 4 = 31-40, and 5 = 41+). For instance, (27/U/F/1) would represent Respondent 27, who is an undergraduate, female, under 22 years of age. Comments provided by respondents are placed in quotations, and have not been altered from the original.

Findings

This section deals with student perceptions, experiences and perspectives, or, more generally speaking, attitudes, toward: 1) democracy in the US, in general; and 2) democracy and/in education.

Attitudes Toward Democracy

When asked to define democracy, respondents most frequently referred to a form of government, often alluding to elections and voting. Many answers contained similar combinations of words about it being a "government by the people and for the people" (21/U/F/1), or a "government in which the people hold the power rather than government officials" (36/U/M/1). Voting seems to be the central focus for the majority of respondents, emphasizing that democracy is the "The ability to choose (vote) someone who has same ideas/beliefs" (10/G/F/3), or it is when "registered citizens have the ability to elect their officials or even run for office themselves" (10/G/F/3).

Using a Likert scale, with 1 representing the lowest level of agreement and 5 the highest level, a slim majority of respondents felt that the US was very or extremely democratic, and a significant portion of the rest situated the response in the middle; only about one-sixth of the responses suggested that the US is not, from their perspective, democratic. More revealing are the comments justifying and amplifying on respondents' answers.

Although the vast majority of respondents felt that elections were the cornerstone of democracy, many students also perceived a number of problems with the electoral process as well as the outcomes. Many references were made to the recent elections, decrying a sense of fairness, as in "Sometimes like in 2004 election not all ballots were counted-especially in Ohio" (61/U/F/1), or bluntly stating that "George W. Bush did not win the election fairly. I don't have enough paper or time to explain fully" (62/U/M/2). One prevalent comment among a minority of respondents, pertaining to those who do not participate in the electoral process was that "They have no reason to complain about anything if they don't vote to change it" (69/U/M/1).

Social justice was a particular area of focus for this study, especially in light of the perception and reality that democracy, for it to have currency, must strive to eradicate injustice (Portelli and Solomon, 2001). The vast

majority feel that social justice is an important part of democracy but a small number of people were confused about the meaning of the term, indicating that “I don't know what social justice is” (59/U/F/1), or that “Justice is important. I'm not sure what social justice is though” (86/U/0/3).

When specifically asked about racism, respondents were polarized, with a slight majority arguing emphatically that racism conflicts with the notion and existence of democracy, and others, about one-fifth, questioning the relevance of racism in contemporary times. For some, racism is a reality because “I feel we will have a female president before a black one” (47/U/M/1), and, similarly, “why have we not had an ethnic president?” (71/U/F/2).

On the other side of the equation, a small minority of respondents argued strongly that the issue is not a racial one, that “An American citizen is an American citizen. Americans of all races should take advantage of our democracy” (19/U/F/1), “In the end, votes have no color” (126/U/F/1), and, as one respondent put it, “Why would racism be an issue in democracy nowadays?” (26/U/M/1).

Attitudes Toward Democracy and Education

When thinking about democracy and education, a large number of respondents, who were current or future teachers and school administrators, did not necessarily make a direct connection between the two. Part of the reason for this is perhaps the discomfort some respondents exhibited with “politics”, and the general concern with the transmission of values, which could lead to concerns of indoctrination and bias. Similarly, most respondents admitted to not having a truly democratic educational experience during their high school years. Of particular note is that most of the students viewed democracy in education as being uniquely or primarily associated with elections.

A number of reasons were provided to explain why respondents' educational experiences were not considered democratic, including the curriculum, the lack of funding, minority issues, and, perhaps ironically given that these are student-teachers, because of the teacher, who some perceived to be a “dictator”. One prevalent comment postulated that “The students do not govern the classroom; the teacher is the dictator. The students do not vote for the teacher; the teacher is appointed” (18/U/M/1). Racial discrimination was highlighted by one student, who contributed that “There is no fairness in the classroom; with the teachers, they expect African-Americans to do poorly; they don't challenge us in advanced courses” (13/G/F/5).

A significant minority of respondents did feel that the education system in which they were educated was democratic but these comments appear to be more nuanced and less forceful than the critical ones above. Respondents commented that “We were always informed of issues pertaining to the school including the pros and cons. We were encouraged to vote when we came of age” (10/G/F/3), “Teachers listen to the thoughts of students and would adjust the curriculum accordingly” (11/U/F/1), and, quite simply, because “I don't have much reason to believe otherwise” (108/U/F/1).

When asked about whether their high school experience had an impact on their thinking about democracy, a small minority indicated in the affirmative whereas most of the respondents were less positive. In some cases, it was clear that this represented, for some students, the first time they were encouraged to think about issues critically. One student claimed that “My school was full of supportive and outspoken people that helped to acquaint me with politics” (1/U/F/1), and another emphasized that “I began thinking for myself in high school and realized for the first time that the things I agreed with were really my thoughts, not my parents” (19/U/F/1).

Many more respondents, however, echoed the sentiment that their high school had avoided the subject or even, more drastically, failed them in not preparing them to deal with such issues. This is represented by comments that bluntly stated “Hell no, went to a city school; football there had an impact on democracy for

me” (68/U/M/2). Others noted that “I didn't fall into the crowd” (16/U/M/1), and, in a condemning way, that “Due to not receiving a good education I feel that my community, city & gov't let me down” (24/U/M/3).

As a middle-ground response to the question about a democratic experience in high school, a number of respondents highlighted that this consisted of a single class on government or politics. Students noted, in a positive way, that “I took an honors government course and the detailed look into our gov't captivated me” (18U/M/1), “My last class in high school was government and I think this was the most effective” (43/U/F/1), and, finally, “I had a horrible civics teacher and did not think much about democracy beyond that class. However I did have a fantastic teacher who taught us about social responsibility to communities, etc.. That did impact me” (71/U/F/2).

When asked about whether teachers should strive to inculcate a sense of democracy in students, the vast majority of respondents agreed strongly, stressing that “Teachers certainly can make a major impact on developing democratic values in students, but teachers also have the responsibility to teach other forms of gov't.” (2/G/M/5). Respondents also emphasized the need to model and promote engagement, with some indicating that “I will teach them (students) not to complain about the world, but to go out and try to change it!” (22/U/M/1).

A serious concern raised by a strong minority of respondents dealt with the fear of unduly influencing students. This is a complex and problematic area, with respondents commenting that “I believe that values are important to teach as long as the teacher does not try to indoctrinate the student” (3/G/M/4), and that “They should teach students their rights, but not instill this ‘sense of democracy’ to the point where the students are indoctrinated” (11/U/F/1).

In the same vein, a small minority opposed teaching about democracy altogether because of the fear of bias and the transmission of values, thus inferring, again, that politics should not be part of education. Respondents were quite clear here in saying “No, because when they try to do so their political views come out” (25/U/F/1), “Teachers are capable of this, but not everyone's opinion is correct” (26/U/M/1), and, finally, that “it shouldn't be their (teachers’) job to do it. The government should take care of it” (76/U/F/1).

Of significant note, some respondents felt that teaching about democracy was not a factor because of their discipline, with some openly stating that “That's not really my field so I don't think it is my responsibility” (41/U/F/1), and “Truthfully, I would be more concerned w/ (with) teaching standards” (5/G/M/4).

Discussion

This research has provided some evidence that, for College of Education students, a critical appreciation and analysis of democracy as a philosophy, ethos, political system and cultural phenomenon is not widely embraced. Generally, respondents did not specifically address the key democratic issues of critical thinking, politics as a way of life, power-relations, the decision-making process, the role of the media, alternative systems, and social responsibility. Almost all of the participants believe that elections are the pivotal underpinning to democracy, and this involves a strong bias toward presidential politics, eclipsing local, regional and international issues. Similarly, international movements related to the environment, peace, poverty reduction, aids and child labor, for example, were not highlighted as being meshed into the democratic web. Holm and Farber (2002: p.129), in their study of American undergraduate education students, found that students exhibited a “high degree of inattention, insularity, and lack of awareness” in relation to “measures of geopolitical knowledge, awareness of prominent international leaders and organizations, and salient demographic characteristics of major countries”. On a more positive note, it is clear that a majority of students understand that US democracy does not work effectively for everyone in the same way, and that inequities are prevalent.

Of central importance in this article, and flowing out of the above themes and analysis, is the connection between education and democracy, which is, according to large number of respondents, a nebulous one. Many participants question the foundation of such a linkage, and provided commentary that suggests that there is broad concern about teachers willingly or unwillingly indoctrinating, unduly influencing, or shaping the values of students. There appears to be a general rejection of the notion that politics should be part of education, which contradicts Guttman (1999) and Freire (1973), who view education, in and of itself, as being a highly political and politicized enterprise. Civic engagement is generally understood in narrow terms, concentrated within a specific class/course or associated with elections. The critical area of social justice (Portelli and Solomon, 2001), especially in relation to race and poverty, is not fully supported as an integral part of democracy, and even contested by a minority.

Democracy requires lived experience, social interaction, connecting problems and forces, and continually challenging the social conditions defining the formal scaffolding upholding democratic institutions (Dewey, 1958). This research suggests that current and future teachers need more training on how to develop and teach democratic notions, concepts, activities and materials. Hess (2004) has found that teachers can develop skills in promoting discussion on “controversial issues”. The sentiment that politics must be avoided should be addressed so that social justice issues can be discussed in an open and beneficial way throughout the curriculum, not centralized in the social studies or government class. Educational systems should also review how they are organized in order to encourage, cultivate and develop civic engagement, inside and outside of the classroom. This would require school boards and governments developing guidelines and standards for democracy in education in the same way that they are presented, and monitored, for academic areas.

Education systems need to be able to debate, and establish, the parameters for becoming engaged in, democracy in order for their students to be able to understand that it involves more than elections. Especially in contemporary times, the notion of being conversant with, and immersed in, a multicultural society requires diverse experiences throughout the curriculum as well as in extra-curricular and service-learning activities (Guttman, 1999). Kymlicka (1995) has written widely on the concept of multicultural citizenship, questioning narrow approaches that can further disenfranchise people from participating in society. Through a systematic review of what democracy means, combined with how schools can become engaged in “thick” democracy, students will enhance, not only their academic, but also their socio-cultural and political experience, thus enriching themselves and the society in which they reside.

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