
Critical Democracy and Leadership Issues: Philosophical Responses to the Neoliberal Agenda

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Democracy and leadership—and especially, perhaps, leadership by classroom teachers—are undoubtedly contested concepts in educational discourse. Different, and at times competing, conceptions of either notion have been proposed and argued for. The fact that popular discourse in education has frequently made reference to these terms and has thus turned them into common yet dangerous slogans calls for a more philosophical examination of both concepts and the relationship between the two. In general, the essays in this issue contribute to such an examination that goes beyond catch phrases and critically inquires about both theoretical and practical issues. The examination offered in this issue of the *Journal of Thought* is done with an explicit consideration of dominant views both in education and other areas. The current context is one that too easily and hastily admits and promotes a neo-liberal perspective that privileges the technical, efficient, competitive outlook through the distributive mechanism of the market. Moreover, the neo-liberal discourse has co-opted or hijacked both the use of the terms *democracy* and *leadership* to the extent that any conception of either that does not fit with this discourse is deemed not worthwhile or not productive. Consequently, to even raise questions that challenge some aspects of neo-liberal emphases or to propose a broader consideration

of ethical and philosophical considerations is to be *ipso facto* removed from particular discourses and discussions. The concomitant discourse of narrow accountability and limited notions of “evidence” has, in many instances, rendered the philosophical and moral aspects secondary at best and irrelevant at worst.

In view of this contemporary background, it is no surprise that the enclosed articles offer an interrogation of the current norm in education especially in relation to issues of democracy and leadership by focusing on these aspects while at the same time also taking into account issues of power and equity. More specifically, these articles explore some major tensions when one considers the concepts of democracy and leadership in the current context. They focus on these tensions in different social contexts, e.g., the political, international relationships, public schooling in general, the textbook publishing industry in Ontario, Canada, educational leadership, and finally as experienced by teachers striving to incorporate a democratic ideal in public schools.

The first article by Jason M. C. Price provides a review and a challenging analysis of different conceptions of democracy. Working from the perspectives of the Haudenosaunee democratic ideal as well as a critical-democratic framework, he questions popular notions of democracy that equate democracy with voting and procedural matters and identifies contradictions in neo-liberal conceptions of democracy and current practices. Price’s project, which is a bold and urgent one, is anti-colonial in that it attempts to demythologize democracy as a solely European or western legacy. Price’s conception is based on a consideration of both process and substantive issues guided by peace and social, environmental and economic justice. And he calls upon educators to reenergize such a democratic spirit and create possibilities beyond the current narrow constraints. Price’s project is surely not a fatalist one; it inspires hope and action.

Robin Barrow’s article extends the discussion about democracy by critically analyzing and severely challenging common practices in the west that claim to be democratic while engaging in imperialistic moves to spread by force what popular rhetoric in the west claims to be the “truest democracy.” Extending Price’s concern with identifying democracy exclusively to voting and “democratic structures,” Barrow focuses on what he considers to be the two prime values underlying democratic institutions: “equal representation of everybody’s interests and freedom.” Taking his lead from values associated with Athenian democracy, he argues that there is no justification for a country, such as the U.S.A., to attempt to impose democracy on other states. Moreover, he identifies several practices in the U.S. that contradict basic democratic values. To counter the western rhetoric about democracy and the dangers that

ensue from it, Barrow proposes a practice of democracy in schools, albeit a limited one, so students can experience and learn from such an environment, as well as “a liberal or humanistic education for all.” But, of course, a liberal education is not monolithic. While the different forms of liberal education aspire to liberate from narrowness, the nature of what amounts to be narrow as well as the content needed to bring about such liberation, have been bones of contention. These are substantive issues that democratic education and leadership need to engage in openly and seriously.

In the next article Melissa Hagen deals with one such substantive issue by calling into question some of the practices and policies we commonly assume when we commit ourselves to democracy. More specifically she questions the liberal conception of autonomy by examining profound value conflicts between the public school cultures of pluralist, liberal democratic states, and the home cultures of “illiberal” people within those states. She finds the common liberal response that such conflicts can be resolved by restricting “illiberal accommodations” on the grounds that they interfere with the cultivation of student autonomy wanting. The three objections she raises are based on problems with assumptions of neutrality with regard to the individual, impartiality and universality of autonomy, and freedom. While her conclusion does not necessarily deny the importance of the notion of autonomy, Hagen proposes two options to resolve the impasse: (i) a revised notion of autonomy that takes into account the social, cultural, ideological and political influences as well as issues of identity, or (ii) publicly funded “separate schools.”

In her intriguing and explorative article, Cindy Rotmann addresses several crucial issues if one takes critical democracy seriously in educational leadership. Through an analysis of the notion of *seduction* and two literary works depicting leaders she finds personally seductive and yet mentally liberating, she challenges the notion of universally seductive leadership as presented in the work of William Foster, most probably the first to constructively use critical theory in educational administration. While she is aware that seduction can have an element of manipulation, Rottmann argues that there are other positive ways to envision the concept in educational leadership such that it can assist in liberating us from a variety of oppressive educational contexts and enable equitable education. She identifies several implications for educational leadership including the need to move beyond the fixation with models of leadership perceived as “best practices,” the serious inclusion of traditionally marginalized voices in educational leadership, and the importance of using fiction as a legitimate source of data.

In a similar fashion to Rottmann, Marlene Ruck Simmonds analyzes

the notion of *vulnerability* in relation to educational leadership. She argues for the justification of the centrality of critical vulnerability (in contrast to the passive and popular interpretation of vulnerability) in educational leadership if one aspires to live by the values of critical democracy. A reconstructed notion of critical vulnerability creates the possibility for educational leadership to “transform educational and civic spaces into geographically inclusive and just settings.” Ruck Simmonds offers three justifications for this notion based on critiques of neoliberalist reform initiatives, student engagement, and spiritual injury. Such a project calls for a conception of leadership that seriously questions the popular conceptions of leadership based on a rigid dichotomy between leaders and followers, the necessity of an inspirational leader, and a focus on risk management and control. The conception of leadership proposed in this article is based on strategic-risk taking, creative imagining, soulwork, and community building. This compelling position presents fundamental challenges to those teaching in educational leadership programs—challenges that we morally and educationally need to embrace if we believe in democratic values.

The next two articles focus on aspects of the practical by presenting and critically examining two cases: the contemporary textbook industry and democratic teaching. In the former case, Laura Elizabeth Pinto questions the contemporary textbook industry and its development process in relation to teaching/learning practices in Ontario schools. By focusing on the experience of textbook writers and educators, she highlights the power textbook publishers have in interpreting curriculum policies as a result of the very structure and nature of the industry as well as the processes utilized. Her analysis of the examples offered shows that the very structures and procedures used exhibit certain dominant norms that endanger democratic and equitable schooling through the hidden curriculum, limited choice, and highly filtered/censored content in textbooks. Such limitations increase the possibility of indoctrination and dogmatic and closed-minded attitudes in students. Building on earlier articles, one could ask to what extent do textbooks make us autonomous or seduce us to accepting neo-liberal norms? And this situation raises yet more questions about the possibility and justification of autonomy as discussed by Hagen.

In the final article, Teresa C. Placha courageously reflects on her own teaching, and identifies several tensions between democratic teaching, and the narrow (dominating) notions of *accountability* and *success* reflected in the system and administrative practices. To counter such educationally restricting tendencies, she explores the need for teachers to take a “revolutionary role” in preparing students for active and

responsible citizenship consistent with democratic values. While being aware of the risk associated with challenging dominant neo-liberal views as she herself has experienced such risk-taking, Placha, building on the work of Freire and Boal, argues for an explicit consideration of substantive equity issues based on critical dialogue and literacy and the ideal of social class empowerment.

In many ways the broad issue dealt with in this special issue of the journal has a historical resonance. Generation after generation, human beings have struggled with the tensions between moral values and policies and leadership, as well as the contradictions in and dangers of slogans. However, there seems to be a constant need to remind educators, policy makers, and those in leadership positions of the value of interrogating both our views and practices from a critical-democratic philosophical perspective. Of course, the specific contexts in which the tensions and contradictions arise vary. In our case, the topics dealt with in this issue consider the neo-liberal tendencies and practices. Rather than arguing for adapting to the fatalist and hopeless tendencies, the articles in this issue provide a hopeful message based on courage and love of life rooted in thoughtful action, a message well reflected in the writings of such people as Paulo Freire. In his spirit, each writer, therefore, is to varying degrees engaging us in dialogue (Freire, 2002, 45-46). Similarly, by their overall analyses and critiques of issues regarding democracy, critical thinking, indoctrination, seduction, leadership, risk-taking, curricula, oppression, power, autonomy, vulnerability, and textbooks, we are reminded of Egan's (1978, 133) sobering reminder that we do not think nearly as much as we assume because we are trapped in our presuppositions and they—instead of we—think for us. Encouragingly, Egan adds “but there is a sense in which we also think with the phenomena of the world, and it is by being sensitive to the world that we can create some slight reference system for our presuppositions.” Happily, Price, Barrow, Hagen, Rottmann, Ruck Simmonds, Pinto, and Placha and their reflections are a part of the phenomena of our world.

References

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