

A VOLUME IN TEACHING AND LEARNING SOCIAL STUDIES

EDUCATION *for* DEMOCRACY



A Renewed

Approach to

Civic Inquiries

for

Social Justice

Steven P. Camicia | Ryan Knowles

Education for Democracy

A volume in
Teaching and Learning Social Studies
William B Russell III, *Series Editor*

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Education for Democracy

*A Renewed Approach to Civic Inquiries
for Social Justice*

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INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, INC.
Charlotte, NC • www.infoagepub.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress
<http://www.loc.gov>

ISBN: 978-1-64802-312-5 (Paperback)
978-1-64802-313-2 (Hardcover)
978-1-64802-314-9 (E-Book)

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Printed in the United States of America

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Foreword

2020 will be a year for the history books. Not only did the United States succumb to a global pandemic and protests against racial injustice explode across the country; not only did hundreds of thousands of Americans lose their lives and millions their livelihoods; and not only did the lines of polarization across race, income, and ideology widen, but all of these things occurred within the context of perhaps one of the most significant presidential elections within our lifetime. This year put to test the vision of an American democracy—one in which social movements and collective action butted heads against a solidified and rigid political structure, in which ideologies crashed into each other like immovable objects unwilling to bend. If John Dewey (1916) imagined democracy as consisting of public spheres in which communities banded together in deliberation for a common good, then after this year he might conclude that this model of democracy is broken. Where is this united community? Whose “common good” prevails within the current political, social, and economic systems? What has become of our democratic ideals?

As in most times of crisis, we turn to education to seek answers and possibilities. However, this year demonstrated that something hasn’t been working in the preparation of youth for civic life. In a time when the Black Lives Matter movement and the #MeToo movement consistently reminded us that not everyone experiences civic life equally, civic education has either fallen out of the public school curriculum or fails to address issues in our democracy. Not all citizens have the power and resources necessary to

affect social, economic, and political change. One only needs to see the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the health and job stability of communities of color and women.

Education for Democracy: A Renewed Framework for Social Justice cannot have come at a more important point in our history than now. Steven Camicia and Ryan Knowles pose a simple but relevant question: Why has democracy failed to provide equity? From here, they review various notions of democracy and what these mean for civic education. Any teaching for democracy, they argue, cannot be neutral. They assert that “democracy is a value-biased proposition that requires individuals and groups to recognize inequitable power relations, the value of expression, inclusion, and participation in political and social spaces” (p. 5). Too often civic education encourages simplistic deliberation over pros and cons from a stance of objectivity—as if the issues of our time are this simple and political decisions are governed by impartial reason based on a common good. Such benign approaches ignore the histories and legacies of racism, disregards structural inequity that affirms White supremacy and patriarchy, and disengages youth—especially those from marginalized communities—from active political participation. This kind of civic education presents an “idealized” version of civic life that simply doesn’t exist for all students and their families.

Camicia and Knowles call for a critical form of democratic education that is “fundamentally revolutionary because of an overarching goal of empowerment and social justice” (p. 39). They assert that “one of the largest barriers to education for democracy is the narrowing of inquiry, discussion, and deliberation” (p. 50). Rather than presenting traditional and “safe” topics for civic discussion in the classroom (e.g., electoral college, representation of states, voting age, etc.), they encourage educators to “locate inquiries for social justice within fields of power relations” (p. 50). These investigations into the nature of our democracy, they believe, must be centered on an analysis of power. Only by illustrating vast inequities, social and structural, can the real deficiencies of American democracy be studied, challenged, and transformed. Drawing on the work of Iris Young (2002), *Education for Democracy: A Renewed Framework for Social Justice* offers an indispensable roadmap to foster critical deliberation in the classroom. This practice first begins with a recognition of the significance and impact of social justice issues on the lives of citizens, then unpacks the dominant narratives and forms of power that create inclusion and exclusion which serve to maintain inequity, and finally prompts counter-narratives, awareness, and recognition, which form the building blocks for social change. Critical education for democracy, they write, “requires that students examine the ways that knowledge and power are connected, and as a result, how this

connection can serve to privilege some perspectives at the expense of marginalizing other perspectives” (p. 62). Their critical deliberation method offers essential tools for recentering these marginalized voices, a necessary step for social justice. This book is a must for any educator dedicated to the aims of social justice and to the realization of a just democracy.

—Antonio J. Castro

Reference

Young, I. M. (2002). *Inclusion and democracy*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

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Acknowledgments

We are grateful to William Russell, III, for including us in the Teaching and Learning Social Studies book series and George Johnson for publishing our work. We would also like to thank Li-Ching Ho, Jeremy Stoddard, Daniel Berman, Emily Wright, Leila Walker, and Yuyu Sun for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of our book. Steven would like to thank his husband, Darrin Brooks, for his support and conversations surrounding this work. Ryan would like to thank his family, particularly Jayden, Jordan, Mabel, and Corinna for their inspiration on this project.

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