

Democratic Vision of Education: Three Scholars Impacting the Debates on Vision of Schooling

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Abstract -- In the field of education, the debates on the purpose or vision of schooling are always engaged by educational scholars with strong passion and visionary views—provoking thoughts on educational objectives and changing instructional practices and concepts of learning. Among many, three of the main scholars in the debates on vision of schooling are John Dewey, Paolo Freire, and Lisa Delpit—whose works are always referred to and revered by those in the educational setting. The similarity that these scholars have is their democratic vision of education, i.e., the concepts of democracy in education, social justice, and equality. Their works have been referred to and argued for (and against) since their revelation up to now. Such as their *impact*, this article is a modest celebration of the lived realities of their ideas and further possibilities for their vision of democratic education. Many times educational debates in the purpose of schooling are not followed through or acted upon in educational policies, curricula, or instructional practices; however, they still *impact* the way people perceive and discuss about the purpose of education and vision of schooling—hence the future direction of education. As such, the impact the author is referring to is not in the actions taken upon such ideas (i.e., change of educational policies or reforms), but the ways in which scholars and reformers talk about and view education when debating about educational reform, instruction, curriculum, and ultimately the purpose of schooling. In addition, the focus on democratic vision of education promoted by these three scholars is important because the idea of democratic education is the essence to, and sustenance for, a democratic nation whose citizens are active and contributive to the society. In this conceptual paper, the author will briefly describe the essence of their ideas on the vision of schooling, the impact these three scholars have on debates within the education field, and tie the similarities in their ideas for a democratic vision of education.

Keywords — Democratic vision, Vision of schooling, Educational policies, Curricula, Instructional practices

INTRODUCTION

In the field of education, the debates on the purpose or vision of schooling are always engaged by educational scholars with strong passion and visionary views—provoking thoughts on educational objectives and changing instructional practices and concepts of learning. Among many, three of the main scholars in the debates on vision of schooling are John Dewey, Paolo Freire, and Lisa Delpit—whose works are always referred to and revered by those in the educational setting. The similarity that these scholars have is their

democratic vision of education, i.e., the concepts of democracy in education, social justice, and equality. Their works have been referred to and argued for (and against) since their revelation up to now. Such as their impact, this article is a modest celebration of the lived realities of their ideas and further possibilities for their vision of democratic education. As such, I will briefly describe the essence of their ideas on the vision of schooling, the impact these three scholars have on debates within the education field, and tie the similarities in their ideas for a democratic vision of education.

Before I start, it is important to define what I mean by impact. Many times educational debates in the purpose of schooling are not followed through or acted upon in educational policies, curricula, or instructional practices; however, they still impact the way people perceive and discuss about the purpose of education and vision of schooling—hence the future direction of education. As such, the impact I am referring to is not in the actions taken upon such ideas (i.e., change of educational policies or reforms), but the ways in which scholars and reformers talk about and view education when debating about educational reform, instruction, curriculum, and ultimately the purpose of schooling. In addition, the focus on democratic vision of education promoted by these three scholars is important because the idea of democratic education is the essence to, and sustenance for, a democratic nation whose citizens are active and contributive to the society—such as that strived in the United States and many parts of the world.

John Dewey

John Dewey was an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer. He is most noted for his democratic views on the purpose of schooling—which encompass the relationship between the child, the teacher, and the curriculum, as well as the ideas of social reform through education. His democratic ideas are espoused in the theories of *Progressive Education*, *Experiential Learning*, and *Pragmatism* that he founded.

Dewey's ideas for democratic vision of schooling derived from his interest in social behaviorism and the role of education in reconstructing the society (K. Greenwalt, personal communication, July 1, 2011). In his book, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Dewey argued that a true democracy is very dynamic in that it allows for a free and equitable interaction; allows for an individual and society to be part of many different groups and interact with groups outside of their own

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group; and, gives the individual human the richest quality of experience (K. Greenwalt, personal communication, July 1, 2011). In the pursuit for a rich, satisfying life experiences, Dewey believed democracy is the best way in that it promotes constant and broad interaction that can enrich and cultivate our personal experiences (K. Greenwalt, personal communication, July 1, 2011). In his espousal of these ideas, John Dewey believed that education and learning (as social and interactive processes) play important roles in achieving a democratic society. For humans are social beings, Dewey believed that educational reformers must strive for a practicable educational reform to keep the temporal aspects in balance—drawing from past, to develop the future, in order to make sense for the present (K. Greenwalt, personal communication, July 1, 2011). Dewey (1944) also argued for the importance of educational aims with national aims, in which he believed education is a social process that is important to define the kind of society in mind. The danger of abandoning educational and national aims, or championing one over the other, Dewey (1944) warned, will widen the disparity between the poor and rich, the learned and unlearned.

Dewey's most astonishing idea is his breaking the dichotomy of the two most prominent views of education in the 19th century—the Humanist or Classical view of education (which argue for a more formal, subject-matter based view of schooling), and the Child-Centered or Psychological, romantic view of schooling (Cohen, 1988). Commenting on the diverging dualism that these two views espouse, Dewey (1902) criticized the Classical view of education which strived on logical knowledge at the expense of the dynamic of the child, and thus lacked the connection and motivation in learning. Dewey (1902) also criticized the Child-Centered view of education which he believed was too “formal and empty” (p. 241). Dewey believed these two views are incomplete and promote a sense of dualism, which either will benefit certain individuals over the other, or not benefit all individuals altogether. Dewey (1902) instead argued for the assimilation of these two ideas—subject-matter based education (i.e., logical) and child-experience education (i.e., psychological)—and proposed to view learning as an organic and natural experience in which the child can be socially active and contributive human beings. With his vision of education, Dewey invented a new area of study in which instead of separating the classical and the romantic views of education, he believed that they can co-exist and complement each other (Cohen, 1988), allowing educators to focus on meaningful, practical, and relevant ways a child interacts with his environment (L. Fendler, personal communication, June 28, 2011). By synthesizing these two traditions of schooling, Dewey gave a new vision in harmonizing real experience and academic learning, and he broke down the walls between schools and communities.

Dewey's vision of schooling has deeply impacted the ideas of education—expanding the aims of education,

broadening the schools' embrace of diverse students into educational institutions, and reimagining the nature of teaching (Cohen, 1988). His conception of progressive education helped create new faith in the education institution—persuading people to believe that a structured educational institution can be intellectually challenging and exciting, while staying attuned to students' ways of thinking and their experiences (Cohen, 1988). His ability to envision the society and the societal structures (that shape education) has impacted the debates in the reforms of education. As such, educational reformers tend to look at Dewey in reference to reforming the education system not just in the United States but throughout the world—especially those who try to reform their own education systems from a democratic point of view (K. Greenwalt, personal communication, July 1, 2011). Dewey created a platform in which he set new standards for judging formal education. He made it possible for those interested in education (not just educationists and policymakers) to be able to argue for more wholesome education. His ideas helped teachers, administrators, and parents become articulate critics of the formality and traditionalism that schools promoted at the expense of students' interests and personal growth (Cohen, 1988). Dewey's impact in educational debates can also be seen in the growth of the youthful tradition of innovative teachings and efforts to invent new instructional practices (Cohen, 1988)—much like what he tried to achieve in his lab school in Chicago. The discussion about and works on new conceptions of children's thinking and learning were becoming more available, and many instructional experiments on vocational education and experiential learning were also frequently reported by scholars and instructors (Cohen, 1988). In addition, Dewey also opened up discussions on new concepts of teaching and the changing role of teachers, in which teachers were encouraged to be knowledgeable about experience, academic knowledge, and learning to be able to devise ways for children to learn more naturally in an adventurous discovery through experience and through a sense of curiosity, making learning meaningful and enjoyable (Cohen, 1988).

Paolo Freire

Paolo Freire was a Brazilian educator and theorist whose works were seminal on social justice and social equity. His works, which revolved around the idea of critical education (i.e., to provide education that is new, modern, liberating, and anti-colonial through engagements of dialogues), contribute greatly in the debates on philosophy of education, educational policy, curriculum development, and instructional practices. Born in 1921 in Recife, Brazil—the center of the most extreme poverty—Freire dedicated his life to battle against hunger and poverty (Shaul, 2008). He wrote his most seminal piece, the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, rooted in his own lived experiences in Recife and his social works i.e., teaching

peasants in South American countries (Macedo, 2008). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire focused on pedagogy and the critical aspects of educational foundation—social equity, equality, and democracy in education. Freire’s advocacy for democratic vision of education can be seen in three of his most prominent critiques of traditional education, namely his critique on the *banking model of education*, his radical rejection of class-based society, and his idea of the *culture of silence*.

Freire (1970) defined the traditional educational system as an attempt to subjugate students into receiving structured knowledge that is defined and decided by those in power, in which the students are perceived as vessels to which knowledge is instilled in them without question or resistance. Freire (1970) warned that traditional education oppresses by slotting students into the professions and statuses as desired by those in power (in preservation of their own position and power). Influenced by the liberation theology and modern Marxist ideas, Freire strongly rejected this idea of class-based society, believing that class plays an important role in oppression. As such, Freire strongly argued that the understanding of oppression requires some form of class analysis along with a convergent theoretical framework of race, gender, culture, language, and ethnicity (Macedo, 2008). In addition, Freire also presented the concept of *culture of silence* (Freire, 1970) which he described as the ignorance and lethargy of the oppressed that occurred as a direct result of the economic, social, and political domination in which the traditional education system and class-based society serve as major tools to the sustenance of oppression (Shaull, 2008). The danger of culture of silence, Freire warned, is that the oppressed are kept at a position of ignorance and without critical awareness, which thus makes it impossible for them to respond to the dire realities of their world (Shaull, 2008). Freire urged for the oppressed to look “critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others” so that “the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it” (Shaull, 2008, p. 32).

Freire promoted the idea of *critical education*, in which he saw education as a political act that could not be divorced from pedagogy. Unfair and undemocratic foundation of education is seen by Freire (1970) as an “oppression that leads to dehumanization of the both the oppressor and the oppressed” (p. 150). Freire believed that teachers and students need to share democratic social relations of education in which both teachers and students should be actively engage in the critique and production of knowledge. This idea of *liberating pedagogy* (as Freire called it) entails a dialogic relationship between the teacher and the students, in which both the teachers and students organize the content of education or political action based on the concrete, current, existing, and relevant situations that reflects the authentic needs and aspirations of the people. Freire (1970) warned that

many educational plans failed due to reformers designing them according to their own personal view of reality, and not taking into account the students and the society to whom the reforms were directed. In suggesting a way to achieve a democratic and equitable vision of education, Freire proposed for *problem-posing education*—a method of teaching that emphasizes critical thinking for the purpose of liberation—in which both the teachers and students critically perceive the realities of their lives as a jumping point in the process of educational transformation (Macedo, 2008).

In the words of Macedo (2008), the most impactful contribution Freire had on the education scene is he gave scholars and educationists “a language to critically understand the tensions, contradictions, fears, doubts, hopes, and “deferred” dreams” (p. 11) the oppression and liberation that education can bring. Freire provided scholars a tool to reflect upon, and understand, the role of education in sustenance of oppression, and its polar role in achieving democratic solution (Macedo, 2008; Shaull, 2008). Paolo Freire also directly influenced the formation of the Critical Pedagogy movement—a philosophy of education which draws on ideas of radical democracy and social justice, and strives to help students develop senses of consciousness of freedom, be aware of authoritarian tendencies, and engage in knowledge and power (A. Segall, personal communication, September 7, 2011). Freire’s educational philosophy gave birth to the theory and methodology of Critical Pedagogy, which has since developed and branched into further theoretical paradigms (e.g., Critical Race Theory) and research methodologies (e.g., Critical Discourse Analysis), allowing those who are subjugated through the education system to participate in the debates in hope to overcome their oppression (Shaull, 2008). In addition, Freire’s ideas of critical education, in particular the dialogic relationship between teacher and student, were highly influential for the ideals in informal education (i.e., the idea of the lived experience of learners) opening doors for researchers and teacher educators to informal ways to educational approach (A. Segall, personal communication, September 7, 2011). Freire’s ideas and works are very inspirational and they are still very much (if not more) relevant today (K. Greenwalt, personal communication, July 1, 2011). This is seen in the kinds of questions asked in the educational debates today such as issues of power, positionality, and absence (among many others) (A. Segall, personal communication, September 7, 2011). To illustrate, there are many educational works based on critical pedagogy such as studies on popular culture, hip-hop music, and video games in bringing children’s life experiences into classroom to raise consciousness on social justice, equality, and, ultimately, democracy (K. Greenwalt, personal communication, July 1, 2011).

Lisa Delpit

Lisa Delpit is an American educationist, author, and ethnographer whose works focus on the inequality of educational system and the role of power and culture in education, in particular the notions of cultural capital, equity, equality, and linguistic empowerment in education. Delpit is a staunch advocate for social justice and social equity, and her ideas have impacted the debates on vision of education in terms of instructional practices, curriculum development, and teacher education, especially in the contexts of impoverished, minority, and diverse cultural settings.

Delpit's most impactful contribution in the debates in the field of education is her seminal article entitled "*The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children*". Through this article, she has shifted the thinking and conversation in the education by making people question the nature of literacy instruction, and the role of culture, race, and language in education (D. Paris, personal communication, September 21, 2011). This article was located in the midst of very heated debate between those who champion the Whole Language approach and those who promote the Phonics approach to literacy instruction mid-1980s—controversially known as the *Reading Wars* (P. Youngs, personal communication, July 18, 2011). Within this war between literacy instructional approaches, Delpit situated herself in favor of the Phonics approach (which argue for an explicit and structured instruction of language decoding skills; phonics rules and patterns; and spelling and pronunciation) against the Whole Language approach (which strive more for meaning-making and strategy instruction that is natural and experiential in nature). However, more analytically, using this platform Delpit pointed to a more serious argument in the debates of education—the issue of social justice, access, and equity. This is specifically argued with her notion of *Silenced Dialogue*, in which she argues that the disempowered minority are silenced due to the inability (or rather unwillingness) of the empowered (mainstream majority) to listen, understand, and take action against the plight of the disempowered (Delpit, 1988). This notion of silenced dialogue, Delpit argues, restricts the disempowered from participating and equally benefiting from the education system—a system that she argues, is developed and sustained by the empowered to sustain themselves and silence those who are disempowered, reproducing social class and restricting access (social and cultural capital) for the disempowered in their struggles (Delpit, 1995). In a way, Delpit was adding a very important critique that was not really a major part of the debate—but one that involves instructional approaches and their consequences for democracy and social equality (P. Youngs, personal communication, July 18, 2011).

Delpit (1988) urges for explicit education on the ways of the empowered so that everyone (not just the empowered) can benefit from the education system (Delpit, 1995). These ways

of the empowered Delpit was referring to is her notion of *Culture of Power*, i.e., the linguistic codes, mannerisms, and culture of the mainstream majority which have helped them in attaining social and cultural capital, hence, their success in education. Through her theory of *Culture of Power*, Delpit (1988) argues that there are enactments of power in the classroom through the linguistic and communicative codes (as well as mainstream culture) that apprehend the minority students' own culture and identity from expanding and evolving. Realizing the importance of linguistic codes of the mainstream culture, Delpit (1995) argues for education of these codes to minority students for them to be able to use this knowledge for their own betterment in education. Her main argument is for minority students to have cultural power by learning and having equal opportunities on the ways to speak, write, dress, and interact like the dominant majority (P. Youngs, personal communication, July 18, 2011). However, Delpit argues that learning of the culture of power should not be at the expense of the students' own culture, language, and identity—in fact, these linguistic codes and mannerisms should be learned as a form of code-switching, i.e., to have an understanding of certain contexts such that of school, university, and job, apart from their family, home, cultural, neighborhood contexts (P. Youngs, personal communication, July 18, 2011). In doing so, Delpit reminds educators to be engaged with the students' personal, social, and cultural backgrounds, and exercise instructional strategies that are culturally-specific and culturally-sensitive that are constant, rigorous, integrated, and skills-based (Delpit, 1988). In her own words, Delpit (1995) urges for teachers "to celebrate, not merely tolerate, diversity in classroom" (p. 67); and, as such, teachers need to apply a diversity of instructional styles (both formal and informal ones) to think about, learn, adapt, and apply the "codes of language within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors" (p. 45).

Through Delpit's democratic vision and pursuit for social justice, there has been more consideration in the complexities of the social and cultural aspects of minority students in educational debates. She manages to offer provocative but nuanced views on the differences in cultural norms and values that affect education and educational achievement, and her ideas have instigated debates for a just and democratic vision of schooling especially to the minority community. Even though her arguments are made specifically in the debate of whole language and phonics approaches, her ideas encompass that of literacy instruction—the most important being her theory of the *Culture of Power*. Through her theory of culture of power, there is realization that culture of power is some sort of way to silence alternative ideas and voices that might challenge the status quo that people are comfortable with (D. Paris, personal communication, September 21, 2011). This has thus forwarded scholars to think about the *Counter-Culture of Power*, i.e., locally and culturally prestigious and powerful practices that students and communities are involved in, that are powerful in given contexts (D. Paris,

personal communication, September 21, 2011). Through the counter-culture of power, scholars are able to engage in critical ways to understand culture of power in order to—not only dismantle it but to —conjoin culture of power with other equally viable ways of being in the world (D. Paris, personal communication, September 21, 2011). Delpit's work has also helped scholars and teachers think about the encounters with the theories, ideas, and practices of culture of power and enabled them to think how instruction has changed and what else needs and should be done (D. Paris, personal communication, September 21, 2011). In addition, Delpit's ideas have been taken up by many scholars fighting for social justice and democratic education for minority students, not only from the African-American perspective (i.e., Arneeta Ball, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Patricia Edwards, Ernest Morrell etc.), but also other minority perspectives (Guofang Li, Kathryn Au etc.).

CONCLUSION

Dewey, Freire, and Delpit have made deep and lasting impacts on the debates on the vision of education in which their democratic vision of education has been helpful in informing and advising policy makers, teacher educators, researchers, and teachers. Even though each scholar was writing during different times and under different educational circumstances, each of them presented core ideals of democracy. Each of them saw the true value of education, and strived for social equality and justice by having both the empowered and disempowered discuss and decide on the purposes and practices of education. When analyzed carefully, their ideas do not specifically strive for one educational approach over the other, instead, they argue for education that is eclectic, democratic, accessible, relevant, and meaningful—for the betterment of not just the students and teachers, but the society as a whole. These scholars opposed the idea of sociological oppression, and fought to pry us away from ignorance, be it in the forms of instructional approaches; the societal and sociological roles of the dominant and the minority; or instructions based on skin colors and linguistic preference. All three scholars argued for meaningful and contextually-relevant education that are applicable to children's social, psychological, cultural, cognitive, and contextual elements in the hope for a healthy, contributive, democratic society. While all three had personalized theories to instructional approaches, they all fought for education that exploits the potential of the student and cater to their needs—not solely for the children's own personal development, but the development of the society. Their ideas for democracy in education has been carried out in many debates in the field of education, and will continue to be used and referred to when talking about the purpose of education and the idea of democracy in education.

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