

Why Critical-Democratic Engagement?

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Abstract:

As an alternative to either conservative or liberal conceptions of student engagement, this paper provides the groundwork for a conception of student engagement that is consistent with critical democratic ideologies of schooling which we refer to as 'critical-democratic engagement.' More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to further the discussion of critical-democratic engagement by clarifying the meaning of critical engagement, its importance and significance, and its implications for education. The paper proposes a conception of student engagement based on critical-democratic practice that entails the enactment of a curriculum of life.

Introduction

'Student engagement' has become a popular, and at times, empty and superficial, catch phrase or slogan in current educational discourse. In an earlier paper (McMahon & Portelli, 2004), we look at studies which have been conducted with the purpose of identifying the different formats student engagement takes in schools, or identifying those conditions that either promote or hinder student engagement including qualities of teaching or teachers, and school culture and policies (Newmann, 1992; Finn &

Voekl, 1993; Strong, Silver & Robinson, 1995; Burke & Nierenberg, 1998; Maeroff, 1998; Smith et al. 1998; Fawcett, 1999; and Cothran & Ennis, 2000). We explore the problematic nature of liberal and conservative notions of student engagement, central to which, and often unarticulated, are purposes of student engagement, and the criteria, standards, and norms which are used to determine the quality and degree of engagement. We argue that with such philosophical issues left unexamined, empirical and psychological work on student engagement could simply, and perhaps unwittingly, reproduce existing dominant views that promote a deficient and exclusionary mentality. As an alternative, we provide the groundwork for a conception of student engagement that is consistent with critical democratic ideologies of schooling which we refer to as 'critical-democratic engagement.' The connection between student engagement, critical pedagogy, and democratic practice provides a perspective that could overcome at least some of the limitations of traditional definitions of student engagement.

The purpose of this paper is to further the discussion of critical-democratic engagement with reference to the following questions. What is critical engagement? Why is it important? What are the implications of this conception of engagement for educators? We propose a conception of student engagement based on critical-democratic practice which entails the enactment of a curriculum of life (Portelli & Vibert, 2001). Such a curriculum seriously addresses immediate students' concerns, at the personal, social and political levels. Based on the beliefs and values inherent in a critical-democratic perspective, in this paper we offer an educational, moral and political justification for a critical perspective on student engagement.

Critical-Democratic Conception of Engagement

There are different conceptions of democracy and critical thinking. With regard to the notion of democracy one needs to note two important distinctions. First, there is the distinction between democracy as a form of government and democracy as a way of life. Second, that between participatory or public democracy, on one hand, and protectionist or minimalist or managed/market democracy, on the other hand. The notion of democracy that informs our position is based on participatory democracy as a way of life. In short democracy is conceived as an ongoing reconstructive process "associated with equity, community, creativity, and taking difference seriously" (Portelli & Solomon, 2001, p. 17). Another significant component of this conception of democracy is that of 'critical inquiry.' Consistent with this notion of democracy, critical inquiry is seen as an inquiry whereby students and educators develop skills, dispositions and actions that are called for by a reconstructive conception of democracy. As Martin (1992) has argued, a spectator citizenry is inconsistent with critical democracy. If critical inquiry is to inform life, thought and action should not be separated. Moreover, she concludes that "the best thinking in the world is of little avail if a person has not acquired the will, the ability, the skill, and the courage to act on it" (p. 178).

We do not mean to suggest that the critical-democratic meaning of engagement should take only one form. In other words, we do not want to reduce engagement to a set of techniques, strategies or behaviours that are meant to be universally replicable regardless of context. In contrast, given the differences in the nature of social structures and interactions, a reductionist stance of engagement is untenable. Irrespective of the specific forms engagement can take, we believe that these forms

need to be consistent with the purposes of education as conceived within a critical-democratic perspective. Critical engagement as we conceive of it, like the concept of critical democracy includes both a procedural and a substantive aspect. Hence, engagement is not viewed simply as a matter of techniques, strategies or behaviours, nor is it seen as a phenomenon that exists solely within students. Instead it has built into it intrinsically the purpose of democratic transformation. Engagement is realized in the processes and relationships within which learning for democratic reconstruction transpires. As a multifaceted phenomenon, engagement is present in the iterations that emerge as a result of the dialectical processes between teachers and students and the differing patterns that evolve out of transformational actions and interactions. As enacted, engagement is generated through the interactions of students and teachers, in a shared space, for the purpose of democratic reconstruction, through which personal transformation takes place. Some have argued that the notion of 'relationships' is crucial to a meaningful conception of engagement (See, for example, Smith et al., 1998). While we do not deny the importance of relationships, we believe that it is equally vital to consider the *nature* of the relationship in the educational process. The notion of relationships in a critical-democratic framework is *qualitatively* different than that found in either a conservative or liberal framework.

Freire (1998) and hooks (1994) when commenting on student engagement argue for the importance of teachers being engaged with learning. Based on the view that there is no teaching without learning, Freire concludes that "[a]s a teacher, I cannot help the students to overcome their ignorance if I am not engaged permanently in trying to overcome my own" (1998, p.89). In contrast to the notion of engagement as something that is either the responsibility of students, or something teachers do to students, hooks envisions engagement as a method of empowerment for students and teachers *alike*. Engaged pedagogy "means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (hooks, 1994, p.15). Engaged pedagogy implies both engaged students and teachers.

But engagement in itself does not guarantee the realization of the purposes of a critical-democratic framework. We need to ask: Engagement for what? Granted that when students and teachers are engaged, the classroom is a dynamic, energizing environment. But not all dynamic and energizing environments necessarily involve a critical-democratic awareness. For example, Jim Keegstra's classes were in many ways engaging and Keegstra was considered to be a very good teacher.¹ Yet many have found his aims and purpose of engagement both educationally and morally reprehensible. Engaging students in literature and activities aimed at denying the existence of the holocaust surely do not fulfill the aims of critical-democratic education. From our perspective, engagement is realized in the processes and relationships within which learning for democratic transformation transpires. In response to questions as to the purposes of engagement, Portelli and Solomon (2001) assert that democratic transformation is a form of inclusive education "designed and implemented to achieve equity, social justice, and social transformation" (p. 19).

¹ Jim Keegstra was a history teacher in Alberta who was found guilty of promoting racial hatred through teaching, particularly that the Holocaust never took place. See Hare (2001) for a detailed account.

Consistent with Freire's understanding of the teaching/learning dynamic, Chavez and O'Donnell (1998) identify engagement as a phenomenon which "organically manifests within and between students and teachers within the temporal and spatial context" (p. 2). The temporal and spatial context goes beyond school buildings and timetables. It includes, for example, how the purposes and conception of education, individuals and groups are constructed within the teaching and learning environment, the nature of the relationships in the educative process, and the substantive issues that are raised and discussed and the way they are dealt with. The emphasis on the temporal and spatial context is crucial if teaching is conceived as "a text that has to be constantly read, interpreted, written, and rewritten. In this sense, the more solidarity there is between teacher and student in the way this space is mutually used, the more possibilities for democratic learning will be opened up in the school" (Freire, 1998, p.89). Engagement occurs within a context of permeable classroom, school and community boundaries. According to hooks (1994), engaged pedagogy goes beyond the classroom and is constantly changing.

Essential to this conception of engaged pedagogy or student engagement is a notion of critical inquiry whereby students and educators develop knowledge, skills, values, dispositions and actions to address substantive issues. Within this framework, as Chavez and O'Donnell (1998) argue, engagement entails that students and educators "do not accept the status quo and begin to unconsciously transform themselves to understand the status quo and place themselves into a location for liberatory action based on a praxis of social justice" (p. 2). If critical inquiry is to inform life, thought and action cannot be separated (Foster, 1986; Martin, 1992). Furthermore, hooks (1994) identifies "commitment to engaged pedagogy as an expression of political activism." (p. 203). The need to challenge the status quo is supported by Anderson et al. (1998) who emphasize the importance of questioning and challenging "authoritative discourses" so that "engaged classrooms are sites of resistance as students and teachers are engaged in a critique of power" (p. 275). Freire (1998) claims that the meaning of democracy which informs this pedagogy "does not exist in the muteness of those who have been silenced but in the stirrings of those who have been challenged, in the doubt of those who have been prodded, and in the hopes of those who have been awakened" (p. 86).

Significance of Critical Engagement

A critical-democratic conception of engagement is consistent with the purposes of education, if we are authentic in our declarations that we value democratic principles and practices. This notion of engagement coheres with two distinct but not necessarily exclusive images of education; firstly, one which sees the goal of education as a means of preparing students for participation in democratic society, and secondly, a vision of education as a vehicle for democratic transformation. Although the practice of critical-democratic engagement is consistent with both perceptions, the latter consciously recognizes that vast numbers of students are not well served within traditional notions of schooling or conservative and liberal perspectives of engagement. Such conceptions see engagement as politically and educationally neutral and as such serve to reinforce the status quo including the inequities embedded in it even if this is not their overt intention. Research on effective schools (Leithwood, Fullan & Watson, 2003) refers to students who continue to be disadvantaged and marginalized by and within schools as the 'unintended consequences' of educational reform initiatives. Conversely, central to critical-democratic approaches to

engagement is the recognition of the significance of student and teacher locatedness relative to the hegemonic educational, institutional, and societal structures within which schooling takes place.

Even if democratic transformation is not seen as the purpose of education, school boards in their mission statements articulate goals of preparing students for participation in democratic societies. Portelli (2001) distinguishes between concepts of 'education for democracy' and 'democracy in education.' The first conception may lend itself to the development of civics courses and 'character education' initiatives which develop a laundry list of 'values' and attributes of 'good citizens' and which by not addressing how these are enacted or questioning who they benefit and disadvantage may simply serve to reinforce compliance. Consistent with critical-democratic conceptions of engagement notions of 'education for democracy' can be extended to encompass 'democracy in education' which "implies that there is room for developing democratic practices and dispositions in education" (Portelli, 2001, p. 279).

Critical engagement can be justified on several grounds. From an educational perspective, if education is deemed as intrinsically involving critical awareness and understanding, authenticity, open-mindedness, dialogue, and an element of autonomy and self-determination (rather than simply rote learning and mechanically and blindly fulfilling the requirements of a formal curriculum), then critical engagement would provide better opportunities for achieving *educational* ends. As Freire (1998) argues, students and teachers who are engaged in critical learning "will be engaged in a continuous transformation through which they become authentic subjects of the construction and reconstruction of what is being taught..." (p.33). From this perspective, then students (and teachers) are considered as subjects or agents whose needs and concerns deserve to be taken seriously (rather than disregarded or merely romanticized). The intrinsic worth of the learner associated with critical engagement provides a moral justification for this kind of engagement. Moreover, inbuilt into this perspective of engagement is the awareness and moral concern to raise the question of the purpose of engagement. That is, from this perspective it is essential to ask the questions: engagement for what? And in whose interest? The very consideration of these questions and the concern for issues of equity and social justice implicit in them, provide a political justification for critical engagement.²

Implications For Educators

The critical-democratic perspective of engagement articulates a political and educational stance which recognizes existing inequities and believes in the possibilities of rectifying them. As hooks, Simon and Freire acknowledge, this requires "teaching against the grain," which, in turn, calls for courage and risk taking. If we believe in democratic values (such as, equity, fairness, inclusion, valuing difference, autonomy and connectedness, and open and free discussions), then the critical-democratic conception of engagement is the most consistent and plausible one

² Of course, these justifications rest on a critical or participatory conception of democracy, which itself requires justification. See Graham (2001) for two justifications of this conception: one rests on a justification of participatory democracy as an end in itself and which is based on a certain conception of human nature; the other is based on participatory democracy as a means to achieving social justice and which is based on a certain epistemological position.

to adopt. Teaching against the grain not only refers to the need to challenge institutional structures. Educators are also called on to have the courage to risk uncovering and reconfiguring their perceptions of their own power and control within classrooms and providing space for student ownership of and for educational decision-making. As hooks (1994) states, the empowerment of students within classrooms cannot happen if educators “refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (p. 21).

Taking engaged pedagogy seriously has implications to the way we envision schools, communities, policy, leadership, curriculum, and teacher preparation. In all of these venues it requires us to move beyond the articulation of democratic values to their enactment. How school and communities are conceived of is central to this process. We need to shift from a focus on ‘schooling’ with its attendant implications of compliance and control to an emphasis on ‘education’ as conceived by Freire and hooks. Secondly, there need to be permeable boundaries between schools and communities recognizing that there is not *a* school community. Rather, school communities are multiple and diverse.

The notion of school leadership which is consistent with critical-democratic engagement is emancipatory and inclusive (Ryan, 2003). It challenges educators to engage students, parents, teachers and other members of school communities in authentic consultation and collaboration in the creation and implementation of meaningful policies and procedures within and across schools.

In the popular discourse curriculum is seen as official documents, disciplines, subject matter or content, plans, objectives, or student experiences. From a critical-democratic perspective, engaged pedagogy is consistent with a notion of curriculum that has been referred to as a “curriculum of life.” While the curriculum of life does not ignore the significance of the aspects commonly associated with curriculum, “it is a view of curriculum as a dynamic relationship among teachers, students, knowledge, and contexts.” (Portelli & Vibert, 2002, p. 36). In their depiction of a “curriculum of life” Portelli and Vibert (2002) describe the interconnectedness between classroom and the students' communities:

Grounded in the immediate daily worlds of students as well as in the larger social and political contexts of their lives, curriculum of life breaks down the walls between the school and the world. It is an approach that presupposes genuine respect for children's minds and experience - without romanticizing either. It is an approach that is inconsistent with a deficit mentality common in many schools (p. 38).

Taking critical-democratic notions of engagement seriously has repercussions for faculties of education and school boards in their approaches to teacher education programs and professional development initiatives. Beginning with the recruitment and selection of teacher candidates administrators need to examine how their institutional practices align with their professed commitment to school communities. Initial course work and professional development programs need to deconstruct notions of teaching, learning, leadership, and community with clear links between theory and practice which value the contributions of both. Faculty and board personnel are responsible for ensuring that instructors and supervising teachers are

positive teacher mentors who are actively engaged in learning that is meaningful to their students.

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