

Media Review

Preparing Citizen-Agents: A Review of *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and Political Activism*

Gregory J. Soden, Columbia Public Schools, Columbia, Missouri.

Stitzlein, Sarah M. (2012). *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and Political Activism*. Boulder, CO; Paradigm Publishers. ISBN-13: 978-1612052281.

Abstract: *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and Political Activism*, by Sarah M. Stitzlein, argues that all students have the right to public education that aims to prepare them for social dissent. Offering a guide to preparing students for dissent agency, Stitzlein offers teachers a rationale for why dissent matters, the history of dissent grounded in the philosophy of critical pragmatism and hope, and what preparation for dissent looks like in a public school classroom. Since dissent is truly a global phenomenon, the book has relevance for educators worldwide who believe in strengthening democratic public life for all citizens in every nation.

Introduction

Dissent is a global phenomenon. In the years since September 11, 2001, dissent around a multitude of social issues has risen to high levels worldwide. For example, in the United States, citizens of all dispositions engage in dissentious activity from the far-reaching Occupy movement, the Tea Party, the debate of marriage equality, and environmental movements such as 350.org or the Keystone XL pipeline. In 2012, over 500,000 protesters in Quebec, Canada, achieved remarkable success opposing tuition increases and anti-protest laws. For the past two years, hundreds of thousands have engaged in intense civil demonstrations as part of the broad Arab Spring movement. In South America, laid-off Argentine workers occupy factories while neighboring Brazilians protest issues surrounding the 2016 Olympics.

Each of these movements has a shared characteristic in that citizens act in the *hope* for improving life, but each also varies in effectiveness, clarity of objectives, and overall impact. So the question is implored: How do societies cultivate citizen-agents with the abilities and cognitive skills to initiate and sustain *effective* dissent movements? *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and Political Activism*, by Sarah M. Stitzlein (2012a), seeks to answer such a question; it is a relevant and judicious book broadly aimed at K-16 educators invoking explicit preparation of students for effective, organized, and pragmatic societal involvement.

Book Overview

The argument woven throughout *Teaching for Dissent's* eight chapters is that all students attending schools in democratic nations 'have a positive right to learn how to politically dissent' and that teachers have the duty to ensure students have opportunities to learn related skills (p. 77). Such skills include practicing dissentious expression, engaging in public forums, and challenging injustice. In order for teachers to effectively prepare students for developing

Corresponding author email: Gregorysoden@mail.missouri.edu

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Page 92

citizenship, it is important for them to consider and understand the history of dissent, why dissent agency matters, and the schools of thought informing productive and hopeful movements.

Stitzlein organizes the book into the following format: why dissent matters, a history of dissent in America, critical pragmatist philosophy, and, finally, practical teaching recommendations. The frameworks of the book are critical and experiential pragmatism, as well as the notion of interlacing all dissent with hope. Pragmatism requires a person's experiences to inform their decisions for improving society; in order for a student to become a mature citizen able to engage in dissentious activity, they must be given opportunities in school to practice clearly articulated dissent from a young age and be shown why some forms of dissent (peaceful over violent; articulated as opposed to vague objectives) are more effective than others.

Stitzlein's first chapter introduces readers to the book's principle arguments. Well aware of the lack of democratic opportunities students currently receive in schools, Stitzlein argues educators must cultivate dissent abilities in students, regardless of political affiliation. After all, while dissent is often mischaracterized as the domain of the Left, such stereotypes weaken the position of all. Chapter two then offers a history of dissent in the United States and how political action is embedded into the nation's culture. The chapter also highlights the international influences upon American dissent, including the English Whigs of the 1690s and the Scottish Enlightenment of the 1750s. The historical chapters of the book are helpful summaries for readers to comprehend the sophistication of dissent movements and describe how dissent can turn 'self interest into public good' (p. 19). The early tradition of *some* citizens in early America to engage in public discourse rings true today: large numbers of young people are interested in the workings of democracy and there is a desire among historically marginalized people to engage in public action. The question remains if schools will prepare these willing citizens adequately for citizenship.

Chapter three offers explanation for why dissent matters to sustain democracy. As Parker (2003) gently warns, 'democracy is not a given in nature, like gold or water...there can be no democracy without its builders, caretakers, and change agents: democratic citizens' (p. xvii). It seems reasonable to suggest that many potential democratic change agents will never realize their own power and may become disillusioned with the lack of engagement in school without Stitzlein's proposed purposeful cultivation. Without dissent pedagogy, educators lackadaisically allow many leadership-oriented students to never reach their social potential. Stitzlein's declares that dissent is 'fundamental to a vibrant democracy', (p. 69) but the irony is that the very institutions charged with preparing democratic citizens are dominated by an ethos of control.

Effective dissent by cultivated citizens that positively impacts a situation is contingent upon the disposition of the movement; notably, is the movement 'good'? Stitzlein's characteristics of good dissent, mirroring many of Naomi Wolf's (2012) suggestions for building strong social movements, include: noncompliance in the face of perpetual injustice; hopeful as opposed to cynical; collective as opposed to individual; peace as opposed to lawlessness; and a dedication

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to language, reasoning, strategy, and intellectualism. The reflective and emotional power of the effective dissenter is one of the hallmark inclusions in the book.

Chapter four defines the difference between positive rights and negative rights. A positive right is a “right that guarantees that certain services will be provided by the state as a correlative duty” to citizens (p. 77). A negative right is when citizens seek a guarantee that the government will not interfere with their actions or expressions. While the United States is seen as a largely individualist nation based on personal freedoms *from* intrusion or interference, *Teaching for Dissent* calls for explicit clarity to students regarding their entitlement to education fostering dissentious activity. While psychological research would argue that youth do not possess the cognitive abilities to engage in public action, offering students the opportunity to dissent peacefully and coherently in school is a building block toward establishing preparedness for social action and critical thinking. If schools only serve to suppress students or teach students about dissent as a negative right, schools will fall into irrelevance as the globalized world and high levels of engaged youth leave institutionalized thinking behind.

Chapters five and six discuss the omission of dissent from curriculum and how teachers (are) silence(d). Silencing brings to mind Tucson’s Mexican-American studies and the teachers, students and community members fighting for the program’s survival. Opposition to the program, mostly white state administrators, suggest the program condones ‘the overthrow of the...government’ (Horne, 2011). The opposition neglects to acknowledge the historical irony of their oppressive actions while strengthening the dissent resolve of marginalized people. In the instance of Tucson, an organized and justified dissent movement gained national traction, produced the film ‘Precious Knowledge’, and has nearly brought one of the nation’s most culturally-relevant programs back from abolition.

Marginalized students are most likely to receive basic, structural civics education (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008), but teachers in Tucson are attempting to escape traditional civics mostly focusing on memorization and replacing it with engaged, culturally responsive, and participatory education. While Stitzlein’s passionate call for dissent education elicits enriching discussion in such a conservative age (Apple, 2000), creating courses designed to empower people will remain difficult for the foreseeable future. It is unfortunate that so many of America’s activist-minded teachers are not nurtured in their ideas, but are instead attacked through a deskilling of their professional decision-making. Chapter seven reaffirms the importance of teaching dissent as a positive right while remaining hopeful.

The final chapter complements a wealth of practitioner-based work. The chapter is directed at practicing teacher educators and teachers of social studies, language arts, and humanities, while also offers purpose to science teachers educating about climate change (Benyon, 2013), art teachers discussing art-as-civil disobedience (Kotin et al, 2013), or math teachers addressing community injustice (Gustein, 2013). Stitzlein emphasizes how teachers can move students towards democratic goals, notably how students can effectively, responsibly, and steadfastly dissent in society after practicing in school. A fascinating aspect of this chapter is the frequency with which Stitzlein’s pedagogical suggestions (public speaking skills, persuasive writing, etc.) *already take place*. The major difference is that the philosophical and “big picture” chapters

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leading to the practical conclusion chapter present teachers with clearer reasons for *why students should care about the work they do*. Readers of this review likely remember asking a past teacher, 'Why are we doing this?' only to receive the unsatisfying, 'it's on the test' or 'I said so'. *Teaching for Dissent* illuminates the *practical uses* of everyday schooling that will build each student's understandings and abilities to achieve full citizenry in their country. This book offers a theoretical and practical blueprint for every teacher in democratic nations charged with educating young people. No teacher need ever respond, 'Because it's on the test' again.

Dissent as a Curriculum and Moral Imperative

Teaching for Dissent is an important book because it elucidates what the social education experience could become. Unfortunately, democratic education in schools is suffering from what Diamond and Plattner (2009) might call a 'democratic recession' (p. x). For example, research suggests schools, likely urban, in the US, and probably elsewhere, do not offer students the opportunities to engage in practical democracy (Kahne et al, 2000). Dissenting students are disciplined en masse, bringing into view the moral imperative of educating all students (Ladenson, 2011). Furthermore, social studies seem to be rapidly vanishing in elementary grades (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010), potentially delaying young people's social knowledge. Scholars continue to see young teachers fall into default modes of teaching in which teaching does not reflect critical, constructivist teaching; instead, young teachers perpetuate traditional social studies models dominated by undemocratic control, lectures, note taking, and memorization (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Conklin, 2008; Ross, 2000; Van Hover & Yeager, 2003, 2004). Furthermore, the least powerful students are on the negative end of the 'civic empowerment gap' (Levinson, 2012). As result of dominant undemocratic forces, limited conceptions of democracy, citizenship, and agency prevail (Castro, 2013; Martin, 2008, 2010; Patterson, Doppin, & Misco, 2012), perpetuating status-quo marginalization.

Teaching dissent is important for teachers worldwide because, on paper, dissent *is an inherent fundamental of education*. The National Council for the Social Studies (2010) claims as its aim the promotion of civic competence among students able to 'be active and engaged participants in public life' (p. 9). Registering one's discontent with representatives and other citizens engages that person in the purest form of civic engagement: dialogue with diverse peers. Stitzlein argues in favor of dissent education for all people because, 'dissent is not simply an activity of politicians or elite citizens, but an undertaking central to the continued practice of such democracy-rich activities today' (p. 25). It is true in many countries around the world that, though all citizens have the right to dissent, obtaining results from movements remains difficult when facing a powerful elite.

Conclusion

Teaching for Dissent is largely written in an American context, but dissent is a global phenomenon and the book is relevant to educators in all nations. The book is useful to teacher educators, practicing teachers, and students of education, as is Stitzlein's (2012b) other work on the topic. As teacher education pushes new teachers towards critical, justice-oriented dispositions and methods, books like *Teaching for Dissent* are supportive tools to share with

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young teachers. The book provides a clear rationale, purpose, and direction that can be pursued in schools worldwide.

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