

Review of

Cambridge Handbook of Democratic Education

by Julian Culp, Johannes Drerup, and Douglas Yacek, Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2023

SARAH M. STITZLEIN

University of Cincinnati

Democracies around the world are facing significant challenges, from populist upheaval to growing preferences for authoritarian alternatives, and from struggles to deliberate about pressing policy issues to political tribalism that places the interests of some groups over others. *The Cambridge Handbook of Democratic Education* reminds us that healthy democracy requires good education and that any attempt to deal with challenges to democracy must also take up related matters in schools. In their introduction to the book, the editors begin by noting that democracy is both a social ideal and a political institution, but they add that we should care about democratic education without getting bogged down by exactly how that education is defined. Instead, they emphasize an education that broadly intends to improve the flourishing of democratic society as well as those who participate in that society. The editors seek to describe democratic education across the curriculum and to develop habits of democratic living. They are concerned with education *for* democracy, while also valuing education *as* democracy. The former, more widely known and celebrated, entails school-based instruction about democratic political systems, while the latter recognizes that the practices undertaken in schools should themselves embody democracy in significant ways. Though this does set up some unresolved tensions between the chapters when the individual authors operate with differing conceptions of democratic education, the broad definition enables the editors to traverse wide and important territory across the chapters.

The editors, Julian Culp, Johannes Drerup, and Douglas Yacek, all live in Europe and each brings robust philosophical training to their study of education. The list of contributors to the volume reads as a bit of a “who’s who” of key figures in philosophy of education today, especially in North America and Western Europe, with a few newer scholars, including doctoral students, mixed in. While I respect the editors’ decision to highlight these philosophical voices, as those that are sometimes left out of conversations on citizenship education, I do worry about the lack of more practice-focused primary and secondary social studies education scholars and teachers who could have contributed significant insights from classroom experience and empirical research. Nonetheless, the editors should be commended for bringing together such a well-respected collection of scholars who employ sophisticated philosophical thinking about educational issues in largely accessible and useful ways.

From the opening lines of the book, the editors position democratic education as something important, but increasingly under attack. It is no surprise, then, that the organization of the book follows suit, first grounding the reader in a historical understanding of and philosophical support for democratic education before turning to look at how it plays out today and at the array of challenges it faces. Broken up into four sections, the collection weaves together important historical thinkers who have championed democracy, key concepts essential to understanding and conducting democracy, and contemporary responses to problems unfolding in democracies today. The editors provide an overview of the four sections in their introduction to the collection, but as I read the book, I found myself wishing there were guides to each section and a conclusion at the end. Those would have helped me, as a reader, know what to focus on when reading and why the topics discussed are worthy of attention. Without these, shifting from one chapter to the next sometimes felt rather disjointed, and I struggled to see how the parts fit together cohesively. That said, I commend the authors for

being inclusive in their approach, taking up a wide array of concepts and matters related to democratic education. At over 600 pages, it is difficult to succinctly summarize this tome. Instead, I will highlight some of the key chapters and provide some brief commentary about each section.

In the “Historical Perspectives” section, the essays describe the contributions of figures who have shaped how we understand the democratic project: Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Dewey, Arendt, Freire, and Tagore. I appreciated that each chapter contained brief references to some of the other historical figures in this section to show how their ideas developed out of or responded to the work of other thinkers discussed in the section. Chapters in this section read mostly as summaries of the views held by these historical scholars. While that is certainly a helpful reminder of their important contributions, I would have appreciated more applications and analyses to demonstrate their continued relevance today. Perhaps the editors might have indicated for the reader why and how we should continue to care about and employ the ideas of these historical thinkers today. I can imagine such information being particularly useful for students who may be assigned this book for a university course and who may have had little or no prior exposure to some of these historical figures.

In the “Philosophical and Normative Foundations” section, the editors bring key ideas from moral, social, and political philosophy to bear on matters of education. By doing so, they aim to show how democratic education embodies important philosophical debates within those fields. For example, Meira Levinson and Ellis Reid employ moral philosophy to make sense of contemporary issues in democratic education, while also showing that engaging normative case studies may itself be a type of democratic education. Lauren Bialystok carefully demonstrates how matters of democratic legitimacy play out in social justice education and shape how we should declare some teachings justified and others indoctrinary. Some contributions in this section were a bit more difficult to distinguish from the previous section on historical figures, including the chapter by Blain Neufeld that takes up the work of John Rawls, in particular his work on reasonableness and civility. Others, such as Michael Merry’s chapter on doing deliberation in segregated school settings, seemed to be a better fit with later sections on contemporary issues and challenges. That said, drawing distinctions between sections is quite challenging when there is considerable overlap and interplay between the ideas they contain. In the face of these complexities, the editors have done a fine job overall in grouping the chapters.

The third section, “Key Topics and Concepts,” considers some of the most important theoretical and practical issues faced in democratic education today, such as how best to handle punishment in educative ways that develop students as citizens (Bryan Warnick and A. C. Nikolaidis), and how best to conduct classroom discussions of political issues in ways that help students learn to manage disagreements and reach decisions (Jane Lo and Paula McAvoy). One of the highlights of this section is the excellent contribution by Gert Biesta, who describes strong socialization approaches to democracy as problematic and turns to theories of agonistic democracy that emphasize difference and conflict instead. In another chapter, Tony Laden intriguingly takes up matters of trust, which are increasingly at risk in polarized societies, and considers how education shapes our trust networks and as a result can sometimes undermine our ability to engage well in democratic dialogue. The last few contributions in the third section are generally more helpfully and interestingly structured as arguments that take a stand on an issue related to some aspect of democratic education, rather than just summarize some historical scholar’s viewpoint. Even as they do, most also helpfully consider counterarguments and alternative views.

The final section, “Challenges,” considers not just practical obstacles to doing democratic education well, but also theoretical challenges to whether or not democratic education is feasible or even desirable. While acknowledging in their introduction to the book that some criticisms of democratic education are justified, the editors are wise to acknowledge that some criticisms also open the door to more autocratic tendencies, and they seek to head those off by reasserting the theoretical and applied value of democratic education. Notable in our current political moment in which there has been a significant rise in populist leaders and groups around the world, Jürgen Oelkers considers how populism operates, and outlines the threats it poses to democracy. Relatedly, Ben Kotzee analyzes the argument for an epistocracy, in which political decisions are made by those with advanced or specialized knowledge, rather than the general population, who often lack sophisticated understanding of problems and are biased toward particular views or are prone to tribalism. This nicely connects to recent celebrations of populism, and questions whether or not we can trust the populous to make informed or wise political decisions. Kotzee concludes that we do not know enough about whether civic education is

able to overcome ignorance or tribalism, and yet we also have no better-fleshed-out alternative right now to epistocratic approaches.

I also found myself drawn to the contributions of Brett Bertucio and Bruce Maxwell in the fourth section. Bertucio is a Catholic school vice-principal who provides a thorough overview of the relationship between religion and democracy, and raises some provocative ideas regarding democracy as a sort of civic religion based on a democratic faith. What comprises democratic education today, the author suggests, may be best described as a form of religious education. Maxwell considers whether and how teachers can be neutral when teaching about politically sensitive issues, ultimately defending teacher impartiality as a professional duty that society expects of teachers. Despite the well-established tradition in philosophy of education to focus on determining theoretical criteria to classify issues as controversial or not, he calls for a more practice-centred understanding of controversial issues that grounds decisions about what counts as controversial and what is worthy of classroom discussion in what matters to students and their families.

Across the sections, the editors are quite inclusive in what they consider relevant topics, concepts, and challenges, even including chapters on the role of poetry in supporting democratic imagination (David Hansen and Yuval Dwek), how to help students not be racist (Ilya Zrudlo), and the role of professors as mentors (Harry Brighouse), and a rather particular chapter that charts the historical promise that colleges and universities in the United States will provide students with upward mobility (Bruce Kimball and Sarah Iler). With such a comprehensive approach, it is hard to identify what might be missing. Perhaps one could argue that growing distrust of traditionally celebrated democratic institutions (such as the media or government health organizations), increasing polarization, and the spread of mis- and dis-information are significant matters shaping the upbringing of citizens today and therefore each deserve their own chapter or more sustained attention across chapters. Or, to more thoroughly consider education *as* democracy, the editors might have looked more closely at matters of school governance and balancing stakeholders, perhaps taking up recent demands for parental control and political takeovers of school boards in the United States as troubling examples. But these omissions are minor and may reflect more of what has developed in the time since the collection was collated, suggesting additional territory for others to traverse, armed with insights from this volume in hand.

Taken together, this collection offers an outstanding contribution to the understanding of democratic education both past and present. As an editor of the journal *Democracy & Education*, I can easily envision how the chapters in this collection will shape future publications on democratic education, offering authors both historical grounding and contemporary relevancy. As an instructor of a doctoral-level course on democratic education, I look forward to assigning this book to help students grasp important theoretical background and make sense of modern-day practical struggles. I encourage you to also take up this commendable collection in your research and teaching.

About the Author

Sarah M. Stitzlein is Professor of Education and Affiliate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cincinnati. She edits the journal *Democracy & Education*, is president of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, and is past-president of the John Dewey Society. Her work in political philosophy takes up the connection between schools and democracy, including describing how to best educate citizens. She is the author of *Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Schools and Civil Society* (Oxford University Press, 2020) and *Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse* (edited by Carol Lee, Gregory White, and Dian Dong, National Academy of Education, 2021).