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Re-imagining Education for Democracy

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Michael Apple, Re-imagining Education for Democracy, Stewart Riddle

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# Re-imagining education for democracy in these politically troubled times

**By Stewart Riddle**

Everywhere one cares to look, democracy is in trouble—from the catastrophic social and economic collapse in Venezuela, through the paralysing politics of Brexit, to the racist misogyny of Trump's USA and the violence of Erdoğan's Turkey. It seems nowhere is immune to the effects of the collapsing systems that held together the twentieth century—liberalism, capitalism and democracy.

Many of my colleagues and I have made a connection between what is happening with democracy and trends in education—more testing and measuring, more collection of data on students and teachers, more restrictions on how and what teachers teach, more control over teacher education, growing inequity and more acceptance of politicised models of education that ignore the public good of schooling. We believe that, just like democracy, education is in trouble.

Regular readers might recall my [rant on this blog](#) at the end of 2016 regarding the problem of living in a post-truth world and what that might mean for education, in which I touched on some of these issues. Following that post, I had a frank conversation with a colleague, who said to me, 'I get it, things are getting pretty bad. But what are you going to do about it?'

It is a question that resonated. What could I do about it?

## Let's talk

I believe the more educators talk about what we see going wrong in education, the more our communities will understand and respond to our concerns. However, it is not simply a matter of talking about what is going wrong; we need to talk about what could happen instead. We need to deeply connect with our communities over our disquiet, hear what they have to say, and build credible alternate visions of education together.

In November 2017, I invited a number of educators, scholars and activists to come together for the *Re-imagining Education for Democracy Summit*. One of the keynote speakers, [Michael Apple](#), spoke about the imperative of educators to be activists and directly involved in the struggle for education. He called upon educators to actively engage with their communities in changing society through more democratic forms of education. The three days of the summit responded to the question of how we might re-imagine education as being *for* democracy.

There have been several outcomes since that time. For example, I edited two journal special issues, including one with Amanda Heffernan, and also have a new [book](#) with Michael Apple. These three publications bring together the work of more than eighty scholars from Australia, USA, UK, Sweden, Thailand, Brazil, Indonesia, Taiwan and New Zealand. While presenting on a range of different research problems, they share something in common that I would like to discuss in this blog post.

## Cautious hope

If I were to attempt to distil some essence from the collective scholarship of my colleagues in response to the question of how we might re-imagine education for democracy, I would say that a common theme is one of cautious hope. There are efforts in communities all over the world to address inequality, racism, misogyny, discrimination and marginalisation through education and its possibilities as a vehicle for social change and reformation.

Some examples of young people, teachers and parents actively re-imagining education for democracy shared in [the book](#) include the accounts of communities in Brazil engaging in collective practices of micro-resistance to oppressive policies, empowering students as co-researchers in transformative projects, engaging young people in cultural citizenship through the arts and the rapid growth of grassroots parent and student opt-out movements in response to standardised testing.

As scholars, we have an important task to document and 'bear witness' to these acts of educational activism and to offer support wherever we can. I believe that the sharing of this work through research publications and other places such as this blog *is* 'doing something about it'.

### Activism of school students

I was heartened recently by the school climate strikes, in which thousands of young Australians exercised their basic right to engage civil disobedience by taking off from school to protest our government's climate policy paralysis. In particular, I find the passion and dedication of the outspoken leaders of this movement gives me hope for our collective future.

Take, for example, these words from 16-year-old Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, in a speech to the United Nations:

We can't save the world by playing by the rules. Because the rules have to be changed. So we have not come here to beg the world leaders to care for our future. They have ignored us in the past and they will ignore us again. We have come here to let them know that change is coming whether they like it or not. The people will rise to the challenge. And since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago.

Of course, conservative politicians and media commentators blamed teachers for putting ideas into these young people's heads. In education-speak, we call such things science and critical thinking. The global activism of young people also shows that even pre-teens today understand how to be political within their communities and how to support each other in the digitally connected world. And yes, teachers can probably be thanked for all of that.

I shouldn't make light of the issue as climate change is a clear and present threat, and young people should be very concerned as it is their future for which they are fighting. But it does make for a particularly vivid example of why I believe that educators, researchers, policy-makers and school systems should be committed to education that is for democracy. We owe it to our children and the children that are yet to come.

### Education should be 'for' democracy

Much education debate is given over to arguments about this method or that, traditionalist v. progressive ideologies, or what knowledge should be included or left out of the official curriculum. While these things are no doubt important and are part of the 'what works' debate, perhaps we need to spend more time thinking and debating what education should be for. In my view, it should absolutely be for democracy.

I believe that we need to demand more democratic modes of civic engagement and participation, and our schools and other sites of education are important places in which the promise of democracy must be allowed to flourish. However, I also know that this will not be easy as we have seen in the stories of collective resistance and struggle for a more progressive and inclusive society.

At the heart of re-imagining an education that is for democracy is the absolute refusal of authoritarian forms of educational reforms that reduce the freedoms of teachers and learners, while also committing to hopeful action that builds strong bonds of community and collective responsibility.

We are at a crisis point in history. Creating new forms of social, economic and political technologies and practices are going to be essential to ensure we prevent a total collapse in society and the life-support systems of our planet. There is no doubt that education is one of our most powerful tools to tackle these enormous challenges. As such, we absolutely need to get this right.

We owe it to our children and their children-to-come.



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## 2 thoughts on “Re-imagining education for democracy in these politically troubled times”



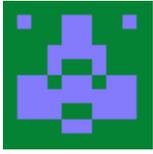
**Jessica Brown**

June 3, 2019 at 8:12 am

Thank you for a fantastic article. As a library assistant in a secondary school library, I am always looking for ways to develop and increase critical thinking in the students. As an adult, it is easy to get stuck in the ‘go along to get along’ mentality of testing, so it must be even harder for students who have always known school = NAPLAN. It’s reassuring to see inherent political connections to education. I will be increasing my library displays from the point of view of students and be encouraging them to participate and, hopefully, drive the ideas.

**REPLY**

June 3, 2019 at 3:55 pm



**Colin Power** I totally agree. As former Professor of Ed and head of Ed in UNESCO I have always pushed the cause of Ed for democracy and what it means in practice in differed National contexts. See my book The power of education published by Springer 2015. Keep fighting for democracy is dying on US OZ and many other places. My book is about the kind of education that empowers individuals groups and nations with the knowledge skills and determinTion like the great kids standing up against gun lobby and for action on climate

**REPLY**

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