Educational Democracy: Fostering the Social Imagination

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The social imagination is defined by Linda Darling-Hammond (1998) as the way in which we share our lives through an expanded realization of meanings within an education for democracy. During critical times for democratic education and a constantly changing society, we must each strive to enact our social imagination to ensure all children have equal access to knowledge and empower teachers to teach in learner-centered and learning centered ways. In this epistemic commentary, I describe Darling-Hammond’s argument for an education for democracy, interpret the implications of the social imagination in my practice as a teacher educator, and evaluate the possibilities and potentialities of fostering the social imagination to further embrace the gender and socio-culturally sensitive contexts of our classrooms.

In critical times for democratic education, Linda Darling-Hammond (1998) asserts that we might turn to the social imagination which “keeps our shared life alive” through freedoms and “more intense, disciplined, and expanding realization of meanings” (p. 78). As a constantly changing society, access to the conversations about knowledge and opportunities to learn become increasingly important to the ideal of democratic life and government. These conversations will ensure students the opportunities to move beyond rote memorization and “construct their own knowledge and develop their own talents in effective and powerful ways” (pp. 78-79). Thus, Darling-Hammond claims in her philosophical essay, *Education for Democracy* that a democratic education should offer all children an equal access to knowledge, brought to life as learning communities that serve humanity, so that teachers feel empowered to teach in both “learner-centered and learning centered” ways (p. 79). She defines learner-centered as teaching that is
“deeply informed by understandings of learners and learning” and learning-centered as teaching that “creates paths to freedom and empowerment for all students” (p. 79). She believes that an education for democracy will enable students to become full members of a democratic society.

Darling-Hammond (1998) supports these claims by first describing the recovery of democracy as it is seen historically. She states that democracy, as pursued by Thomas Jefferson, secured our alienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These rights were subscribed to by those who wished to “cultivate in all students the skills, knowledge, and understanding that both lead them to want to embrace their values undergirding our pluralistic democracy and arm them with a keen intelligence capable of free thought” (p. 80). Throughout the twentieth century, progressives banded together to further John Dewey’s ideas of the early 1900’s and create an educational milieu capable of achieving the backbone of child-centered education. Eventually, these progressive ideas were undermined by an “underinvestment in teachers and school capacity” (p. 80). Thus, Darling-Hammond notes that current efforts to promote democratic school reform will only succeed if built on the foundations of teaching knowledge and through an understanding of the inequalities that threaten to undermine schools and society.

Today, the prevailing view is that students are responsible for their achievement. Darling-Hammond (1998) warns that we must not forget about the issues of inequity and inaccessibility to knowledge in schools. In many ways, U.S. school systems are structured in such a way that inequalities exist based on race and social status. Darling-Hammond warns that unequal access to education is both expensive and threatens the foundation of our democracy. She notes that racist thinking from the early twentieth
century has perpetuated the notion that educational inequalities have little to do with achievement gaps. However, she contends that unequal educational experiences for minority students due to funding issues are at the root of achievement gaps as illuminated by Jonathan Kozol. She notes several studies that support the notion that underserved students placed in environments with better resources, more challenging curriculum, and better teachers do achieve more. Equal access to these experiences is rare.

Unfortunately, it is the teachers with the least expertise in understanding children and learning that end up teaching the most vulnerable students. Darling-Hammond (1998) notes that “teacher expertise” is one of the most important factors in the prediction of students’ achievement (p. 84). She has conducted studies that consistently confirm that underprepared teachers are “less effective with students and that they have difficulty with curriculum development, classroom management, student motivation, and teaching strategies” (p. 85). These teachers teach autocratically and stress rote learning. Darling-Hammond states that unequal access to good teaching establishes the need for humane and empowering education that allows students to shine. Thus, as a society we might look to the full range of human potentiality and teaching that develops its many different capacities.

By embracing the array of capacities in which humans learn we might foster the multitude of intelligences described by Howard Gardner and cultivate an appreciation for the interests of a social community in which our students play an active role (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Darling-Hammond believes that these types of personalized connections with students will enhance their repertoire of meaningful accomplishments such as life-long “learning, doing, and relating to others” (p. 86). Unfortunately, making
connections to students’ lives is not valued as much as moving them through our schools as if they were on manufacturing assembly lines. Darling-Hammond notes that today’s schools are preoccupied with objectives reinforced by “mandated curriculum packages and texts focused on lower level cognitive skills, multiple-choice tests, and continuing underinvestment in teacher knowledge” (p. 86). She warns that the results of treating students this way are wide-spread disengagement and alienation.

Darling-Hammond (1998) believes that an education for democracy will provide students with opportunities to express their own experiences that “connect with new knowledge and with the experiences of others” (p. 88). She notes that this connection allows teachers and their students to better understand and question knowledge and truth, society, and the world through each other’s perceptions and perspectives, across community and cultural barriers. She believes that teachers who are “prepared for learner-centered and learning-centered practice” will embrace the notion of an integrated and holistic education through democratic communities which empower students (p. 90). Teachers must understand child development, pedagogy, structures of subject areas, and a variety of assessment techniques. Thus, Darling-Hammond recommends that teachers be competent in their disciplines, understand interdisciplinary connections, and foster inquiry-based learning. Teachers must be exposed to a variety of teaching strategies that will engage the diverse student body they will encounter. And, teachers must understand their students’ prior knowledge, talents, and ways of knowing. Darling-Hammond believes these recommendations can not be forced into systematic change but must start with each of us individually as we realize the impact of our unique voices.
An Education for Democracy in Teacher Education

To interpret Darling-Hammond’s (1998) education for democracy, I might first look to my own practice. I am a teacher educator at Roane State Community College responsible for the development of hundreds of preservice teachers each year who may eventually embark on careers in elementary and secondary education. In turn, these teachers will come face-to-face with a diverse student population. These diverse students will become the next generation of democratic citizens. According to Darling-Hammond, I must embrace our shared lives and focus on the extended meanings of freedom. Thus, looking inward is the enactment of my social imagination.

Through this imagination, I can envision many implications for my practice. First, I must continue to pursue the meanings of gender, culture, and community as a way to understand an education for democracy. I do this by engaging in life-long learning and participating in educational research. I enroll in many different university courses to increase the depth and breadth of my competence in teacher education, science education, environmental education, and the foundations of education -- some of my interests. I attend professional development conferences, seminars, and symposiums, as well as write scholarly papers and proposals so that I can also participate in them. Additionally, I submit scholarly papers for publication on holistic, integrated curriculum, child-centered pedagogy, and inquiry-based learning. Only after a careful consideration of the many diverse scholars that influence my work can I fully understand my immediate surroundings. Thus, I read a variety of diverse journals, books, and anthologies to further clarify my own standpoint. Through these activities, I start to engage in an education for democracy.
Next, I turn to my students -- the pre-service teachers. Because our college serves students from many small rural communities, I try to keep up to date on the current issues by reading the newspaper or visiting community websites. I enjoy engaging my students in discussions about the complexities of their communities. Often, when I venture out and visit these rural towns, I stop to walk down the main street, eat at a local restaurant, or shop at a local merchant’s establishment. I participate in dialogues with local people to understand my students’ culture and community. Further extensions might include more of an effort to learn about my students by attending their community festivals such as parades and cultural events. Participating in these activities would provide many more opportunities to build connections with my students which extend into the classroom.

In the classroom, I should continue to foster a learning community through social interaction and inquiry-based experiences. I must encourage my students to never stop asking questions by modeling this behavior myself. I should continue to elicit my students’ prior experiences, talents, and aspirations. These experiences, talents, and aspirations manifest themselves in students’ personalized performances of understanding. For instance, a lecture on ‘embracing students’ culture and community in the classroom’ can easily be replaced with student presentations of their own cultural foods, celebrations, games, and experiences. These types of performances enhance my students’ capacities to bridge their prior knowledge to their educational experiences and cultivate constructive thinking (Thayer-Bacon, 2000). Essentially, I must continue to expose my students to alternate teaching and assessment strategies as a medium for shared understandings and multiple intelligences. These understandings and intelligences can also be fostered through the integration of the arts and development of the imagination as a stimulus for
reflection and critique of our shared experiences (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1994). For example, providing opportunities for students to draw and paint mind-maps, sing and play songs, design and construct posters, and write poetry. However, we should not limit ourselves to just our shared experiences. The arts encompass a versatility of intelligences that may emancipate us from our own experiences. Equally, if not more importantly, we might fully utilize our social imagination to transcend our experiences and expand the meanings of democracy.

Since we live in an ever increasingly technological and global society, I should not limit my students to themselves or their surrounding communities. I must continue to take advantage of the windows of culture and community available on the internet. I should take my students on ‘virtual vacations’ to corners of the world they may never explore in person, yet would gain robust experience from encountering. Together, we could communicate with other teacher educators and their students from across the globe in online forums, email, and collaborative projects. Through web-cams we might observe international classrooms in action -- teaching strategies, assessment strategies, and additional ways of knowing. My students could build friendships with preservice teachers at universities in countries such as Cambodia, Scotland, Greece, or Venezuela!

Finally, outside the classroom, I must continue to provide opportunities for students to develop understanding through social interaction. Currently, I sponsor an education club that meets once a month. At these meetings, students invite guests such as local principals, teachers, and community members to speak. In addition, I continue to partner students with experienced teachers from the community in a mentorship program. Through this mentorship or ‘acquaintanceship’, students have an experienced teacher
they can turn to as a resource for ideas, questions, and concerns about teaching as a career throughout their preservice education years. Occasionally, I offer professional development opportunities to attract experienced teachers to our college. These events provide my students with valuable opportunities to gain different perspectives that will broaden their understanding of what it means to teach. Furthermore, I organize an annual ‘symposium on powerful teaching’ so that teacher educators, K-12 teachers, and students can share their experiences and ideas with each other. Together, we might question our truths, release our unique voices, and encourage new ways of knowing as we interact through collaboration and peer interaction both formally and informally, inside and outside of the classroom. Together, we might foster an appreciation for ourselves, each other, and the multiplicities of the world. The implication is that together we can imagine what it means to foster an education for democracy.

Fostering the Social Imagination

Darling-Hammond’s (1998) essay is well-organized and logically sound. However, she doesn’t spend much time defining what is meant by social imagination. I believe that Greene’s (1993) “passions for pluralism” could help here (p. 13). Greene discusses democracy in terms of a community always in the making. Greene’s passions for pluralism transcend our understandings of community when we think about including voices from the past, present, and the future. Because knowers are embedded, embodied, and situated in gender and culturally sensitive contexts, we must be inclusive and continuously aware of every perspective in this discussion of democracy if we wish to fully embrace imagination as the ability to think about an education for democracy.
(Thayer-Bacon, 2000). Thus, communities that are democracies require robust social imaginations, if they are to be always in the making.

Maxine Greene (1995) believes we all have access to our “social imagination: the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools” (p. 5). As a teacher educator, I join Maxine, Greene, Darling-Hammond, and others who are fighting for a more democratic education by illuminating the social imagination so that all “teachers imaginative enough to be present to the heterogeneity of social life . . . may also have strong impulses to open pathways towards better ways of teaching and better ways of life” (p. 12).

With this definition, Darling-Hammond’s (1998) education for democracy is timeless and can be easily extended into the lives of many factions of a democratic society. However, where the social imagination will take us is difficult to know. It may be a different “wide-awakeness” for each culture or community depending on what they value or aspire to (Greene, 1995, p. 35). Thus, is it possible to know that an education for democracy will even describe the best outcome of the social imagination? I believe that in terms of Darling-Hammond’s education for democracy, the answer is yes! The social imagination makes an education for democracy tangible and pragmatic. We should not be discouraged to pursue better educational opportunities for children around the world, despite the challenges, limitations on time, and inaccessibility to resources. Perhaps the fruitfulness of Darling-Hammond’s argument is that we might work together as human beings to paint the portrait of an education for democracy. Ultimately, it is the ideal of an education for democracy that fosters the social imagination.
References

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