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Alisa J. Bates

Willamette University, abates@cu-portland.edu

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Recognizing the Intellectual Complexity of Teaching

Alisa J. Bates

Abstract

This response to “Democratic Teaching: An Incomplete Job Description” explores the intellectual work that teachers must do to achieve the goal of preparing citizens for a flourishing democracy. This piece analyzes the rigor of such a teaching task and asks questions about what it means to engage in the intellectual work of teaching for democracy. Public perceptions of teaching as an intellectual practice and the impact this has on teaching as both a profession and element of fostering democracy are explored.

This article is a response to:

Bradshaw, A. (2014). Democratic teaching: An incomplete job description. *Democracy & Education*, 22(2). Article 3. Available online at <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/Iss2/3>

IN “DEMOCRATIC TEACHING: An Incomplete Job Description,” Bradshaw (2014) begins by sharing a view of teaching as described in popular media through the documentary *American Teacher* and comments that unfortunately, “the film’s portrait of teachers invites more pity than awe” (p. 2). She argues that the misconception of teaching as a nonintellectual practice “threatens the very foundations of our political system” (p. 1). Bradshaw believes that teaching with, about, for, in, and out of democracy is a complex responsibility with many nuances that inform and impact practice in the classroom resonating throughout the country and history. She writes:

To observe that democracy relies upon education is commonplace, of course. Less frequently articulated, however, are the ways in which democracy relies specifically upon teachers and teaching. No matter how thoughtful and thorough our curricula, policies, or procedures, democratic education ultimately takes place between teachers and students. (p. 1)

The work required by teachers committed to democratic education that Bradshaw (2014) describes while discussing critical aspects of democratic education—popular control of schools, student voice and choice, and tolerance of differences—is intense, intellectual, and nuanced for teachers, students, and schools; yet it’s necessary to create classrooms that support the development of citizens who can fulfill this view of society. It is not for the teacher

who is faint of heart to engage in this pedagogy. The notion that teaching leads the public to view educators with “more pity than awe” is something that I find troubling. I argue here that the intellectual rigor required for teaching in the democratic setting described by Bradshaw is not insubstantial and that it must be clearly articulated, given the political and personal nature of this work. Bradshaw’s focus on the various aspects of schooling critical for a democracy contributes to the discussion of how we might recast teaching—but is only the first step. I look more closely at the influence of institutional structures on public perception of teachers. My main goal in this paper is to build on Bradshaw’s work to envision the public’s view of teachers and teaching as intellectual work in the context of a democratic society. I begin by defining what I mean by democracy in education and then examine several recent issues in education that have contributed to the anti-intellectual views of teachers that, as Bradshaw states, make education’s ability to support democratic teaching nearly impossible. My intent is to offer a larger landscape upon which to consider the role of education in a democratic society.

ALISA J. BATES is associate director of M.Ed. programs in the college of education at Concordia University. Her research focuses on student-teacher supervision for equitable classroom practices and teacher inquiry as a practice for teacher development and voice.

Democracy and Intellectual Teaching

Teaching in a democracy is intellectually intense work. To begin to unpack what we need from our teachers, we must define what we mean by democracy, particularly in the realm of education. Wrestling with the needs of a democratic education and the skills and capacities of our teachers is an area with few answers but many important questions. While the public assumption is that Americans live and participate in a democracy, a nuanced view of this concept is critical to a view of public education as a politically and pedagogically complex profession for teachers. Meier (2008) writes, “Democracy is a very complex idea, with many repercussions, and a fragile one at that. Democracy is not the ‘natural’ state of human society, and each democratic culture rests on trade offs that cannot be easily unlinked” (p. 510). These trade-offs are some of the tensions that are addressed through Bradshaw’s use of varying prepositions about teaching “_____ democracy”; however, we must look carefully at what we want out of education as it impacts how we publicly characterize the work of teaching.

When I consider what I most wish our young students be able to do as adults in a democratic society, I want them to know how to critically analyze information, to make reasoned and informed judgments, to be able to see the individual value that may come from a particular choice but also to be able to stop and see the whole, recognizing how their unique positioning in the world may color their view. Additionally, I seek that they be able, when appropriate and necessary, to put aside their own interests after reflecting that the good of the group might benefit from a different choice. Certainly, much of raising a future citizen comes from home, family, and other cultural and societal sources of influence, but educational experiences play a critical role in creating the kinds of adults I describe. This puts the burden of helping to foster these skills and dispositions squarely on the shoulders of the teachers who know the children and make these decisions in context on a daily basis. While Bradshaw (2014) illuminated some pedagogical implications of this work, I would like to extend this discussion by looking carefully at views of the teachers who are charged with this responsibility.

Although a complete review of this literature on democracy in American public education is not appropriate for this paper, to contextualize the work of teachers today, we can look to history for some important lessons about what is expected of schools and teachers. American democracy is uniquely driven by the emphasis on universal public education. As Fuhrman and Lazerson (2005) comment, “so powerful has the faith in schooling been that it is inconceivable to talk about American democracy without reference to universal public education” (p. xxiii). Examples abound—from the emphasis on education in early colonial charters through the common-school movement of the 1800s, to emphasis on equality and access for all, followed by concerns over curriculum during the Cold War and preparation for global competition. This was seen as a novelty in the early days of the United States, and Mann (1837) described it as “the balance wheel of the social machinery” (para. 6) that would help to create a diverse society prepared for democratic citizenship. As Dewey described in *The School and Society* (1899), there is little better preparation for the

real world than participating in the democratic experiences of the public school classroom, where all children potentially have the opportunity to negotiate roles and practice skills (such as compromise and listening) in a setting different than home. *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) explicitly cemented the belief that education for democracy also requires educational quality—we cannot succeed as individuals or as a society without ensuring, among other items, teacher quality to better prepare students to solve problems and address complex, real-world (i.e., messy) problems and meet their responsibilities as educated citizens. Teachers are foundational to the goals that are described in preparing students for a democracy, and ensuring that the work they do meets those complex needs is no small task.

The question becomes: Are there institutional structures in place making it impossible to equip our teachers with the capacity to do this work? The implication embedded in this question and particular view of democracy is that teachers must possess something that differentiates them from the responsibilities that any citizen has in a democracy. Actively teaching others to engage in the democratic process is a far different task than engaging in those practices and responsibilities oneself. Meier (2008) suggests that schools have failed in the work of preparing our students for a democratic society that requires risk and judgment, the capacity to put aside their own wants for the greater good, etc., which raises questions about the traits and skills needed from teachers today:

The only institution [schools] we have deliberately created to influence the young has utterly ignored, not simply failed to tackle sufficiently, this difficult idea as a serious and unifying task, as the coherent framework for all other studies. Approaching this idea requires that we rethink the meaning of schooling and reexamine the linkage between the culture of a school, its particular curriculum, its organization of learning and pedagogy, its governance, and so on and the democratic idea and its future viability in our society. (Meier, 2008, p. 510)

If teachers today were educated in the system that Meier describes, what does this suggest about their readiness and capacity to prepare youth in democratic values and skills? How do we help teachers *use* democracy to teach in ways that support and develop democracy in future adults? What is fundamentally different here, and how *do* we educate teachers and the public on these differences in ways that reflect the intellectual rigor of this work?

When it comes to the teachers who are involved in this process, Bradshaw (2014) writes:

It is teachers who must navigate what Brann (1989) calls the “paradoxes of education in a republic.” These are difficulties that cannot be resolved in the abstract or codified out of existence but instead require careful and continual management by those who face them every day. (p. 1-2)

Bradshaw focuses on a variety of features of schools and schooling that are impacted by this variable focus on democratic

education, and there is research to indicate that the most important in-school factor in student achievement is the teacher (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000; Rockoff, 2004). What happens if student achievement is defined to include not only the passage of standardized tests but also the capacity to participate fully in a democratic society as an adult?

Bradshaw (2014) helps us to think about the affordances and constraints of the context in which teachers are working and how the defining nature of the goal can inform the outcome for democracy. Now, extend the question—if we create such a difficult and rich picture of teaching _____ democracy, who are the people who are doing this intellectually challenging and nimble work? Do teachers have this capacity, both those already in the schools and those moving through the process of learning to teach? What is this capacity, and how is it ensured that our teachers have it? How is the intellectual rigor that is involved in this work communicated and demonstrated, knowing that teaching requires a different form of participation in democracy as compared to a regular citizen?

In the next few sections, I take up a few of the narratives that impact the capacity to make visible and celebrate the intellectual work of teaching as it relates to democratic education. My focus is on the ways in which teacher intelligence is defined and by whom, as well as the underpinning role of the media and its portrayal of the qualifications of teachers, all of which influence education's capacity to support democracy.

Views of Intelligence in Teaching

The previous section raises questions about the complexity of teaching and learning grounded in a democracy. Bradshaw (2014) writes:

In short, neither teaching in democracy nor teaching for democracy can be sacrificed. A teacher must have the intellectual, social, and ethical agility necessary to balance these two functions, never losing sight of either even when they seem directly opposed to each other. (p. 2)

This raises many questions about the rigor of the intellectual work teachers do. What exactly is the intellectual agility that is necessary to teach _____ democracy, and how is it recognized in teachers? What is sought when teachers are recruited to the profession? What must be seen to identify it in practice with children of all ages? Is it simply enough to ensure that teachers have the content knowledge of their work (as often assessed through certification tests or majors in a discipline)? What about elementary educators who teach multiple subjects rather than one? Who gets to decide what view of intellectual teaching counts?

Furthermore, is a teacher's subject knowledge how teaching intelligence should be defined? Is teaching intelligence a fixed, immutable quality that teachers either have or don't? Much research has been done on the various bodies of knowledge that teachers can and should possess: content knowledge (Ma, 1999), pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986), personal practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996), and teachers' emotional intelligence (Anari, 2012). Connelly, Clandinin, and He

(1997) also examined the interplay between teachers' contextual environments, their personal knowledge, and their practical knowledge using a landscape metaphor "because it captures the exceedingly complex intellectual, personal, and physical environment for teachers' work" (p. 673). There are many scholarly areas for this research with a rich view of the dynamic nature of measuring these qualities in teachers, attempting to explore what can be taught and what seems, at least on the surface, to be qualities that teachers are predisposed to possess. What remains, however, is that states and universities have responded to the complexities of identifying and assessing teacher knowledge bases in a wide range of ways. The accountability movement in K–12 education that is seeping into higher education has driven much of this work, cementing a few approaches over others. Yet there still seems to be a lack of consensus about what is sought, except to tie teacher evaluations of knowledge and skill to student test scores.

What this creates is a devaluing of the intellectual rigor of teaching—for any purpose, preparing students for democracy or not. The focus shifts toward the most basic, deskilled views of teaching—it becomes a profession that is simply about taking direction and implementing it, noticeably *without* asking any questions. Teachers are removed from the process of designing and implementing curriculum even though they have knowledge of their students and their unique teaching contexts and communities. Essentially, the people—both students and teachers—are removed from the equation. Recent media postings indicate that teachers were almost completely absent from the process of designing the Common Core State Standards—another rather undemocratic approach. According to Cody (2013), only one teacher participated as a standards reviewer, and no teachers were involved in writing the standards. When this is the case, it is hard to believe that teachers' knowledge about teaching is valued or used in the process of designing curriculum. When that happens, teachers' investment in the work of instructional design is removed, and the students suffer because there is no attention to their needs and interests. Instead, they are simply assessed on a body of knowledge that may have little relevance or connection to their lives. This is a timely example of the devaluing of teachers' roles as designers and implementers in curriculum building and, thus, the lack of opportunity for democratic education to be a part of American schooling.

As a result, in many public schools, teachers have learned to tell "cover stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) that mask the reality of what is happening in classrooms. These cover stories may be positive or negative, but they are the speech of teachers who are living one story about teaching in the classroom and another in more public settings such as professional development seminars. "The telling and living of cover stories may give the impressions that teachers do not know what they know. But they do" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 28). Over time, teachers have been pushed to devalue their own funds of knowledge about teaching and learning and defer to mandates that hit them from all angles. Teachers who do not have faith in their own knowledge do not innovate and create in response to student learning needs. Those who are confident in their knowledge and aspire to create dynamic

professional learning communities in their schools are often unsupported in this work or given mandates to address that undervalue the teacher's intellectual responsibility for the classroom. This telling of cover stories becomes a political act that can grant teachers some power over their professional lives and allow them to continue to work within the classroom, creating experiences that they want for their students in a democratic setting. However, pushing quality discussions about teaching underground in this manner puts the foundation of democracy at risk if all students see is teachers capitulating to demands from the outside without apparent care or concern for the students. While this is not to say that teachers need run amuck with their personal agendas unrelated to their work, the fact that teachers are not given the responsibility to make the instructional decisions that matter for their students suggests blatant undermining of the democracy that is desired. Decisions about teaching made in a top-down manner in which teachers have no voice and choice in their professional roles mirror concerns over the balance of student voice and choice in students' own learning, as described by Bradshaw (2014).

The view of teaching that is floated by those who support the increasing standardization of schooling is one that expects and requires some level of obedience to the outside mandates that are provided to teachers. The type of teaching required by a democratic society is one of intelligence, passion, and commitment to the complex work of preparing each child to be a citizen, meeting each child where that person is, and nurturing each child along the path toward a thoughtful, responsive, and informed adulthood. The extrapolation of this idea to an entire generation(s) of Americans paints a picture of how a seemingly unrelated aspect of learning—the standardization of the curriculum, for example—can lead to a society that is much more heavily driven by a model of leadership that does not include voice and space for civic engagement by all citizens.

Teaching, on the national level, is generally not viewed as an intellectual profession. The popular media and international comparisons have contributed to the view that “those who can't do, teach” (Shaw, 1903) and have led to a greater loss of status for teaching than previously seen. The next section looks at these areas and poses questions that can help us explore what might be done to change this public narrative of teaching as an anti-intellectual practice.

Media Perceptions of Teachers

Bradshaw's (2014) section on popular control of schooling paints a portrait similar to much of what we see happening in education today—at least in the popular media. The notion of “if teachers would only do what we wanted, when we wanted, it would all be fine” seems to dominate. The view of a teacher as a public servant has been co-opted to paint teaching as an anti-intellectual profession that simply requires showing up and teaching as prescribed.

There has been much attention of late, both in educational research and in popular press, to the international standing of American education in comparison with other countries. American 15-year-olds' performance on the 2009 Program for International Student Achievement (PISA) reflects the concern

that is present in all educational circles—namely, that out of 34 OECD countries, our students ranked 14th in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in math (West, 2012). Recent attention to the success of schools, students, and teachers in Finland has impacted much of the fervor over curriculum, assessment, and standards in American settings (Ripley, 2013). While debating the value and purposes of teachers' unions, evaluation systems, and assessment from every political angle, there is a missed opportunity to explore, critique, and borrow from what others have learned about creating a cadre that is prepared to tackle the complex aspects of teaching _____ democracy. The debate on topics such as teacher evaluation and student assessment are intimately related to the debate on teachers' unions and the power that teachers do—or do not—have in articulating the goals and purposes of their classroom work. Yet the primary focus of attention is on the finances at the intersection between teacher performance and student performance. Are students performing up to par and, if not, what needs to change regarding financial incentives to reward or punish teachers? This narrow lens moves away from thinking carefully about embracing a more professional, intellectual view of teachers that has the direct desired impact of elevating the performance of both teachers and students on academic content. Exploring this area would further the intellectual understanding of the work that teachers must do to prepare students for democracy, but this focus is lost with the help of a media heavily driven by sensationalist stories about test cheating, falling assessment scores, etc.

The Common Core implementation process has been one recent example of this. As students and teachers begin to work with these standards, pushback from parents and teachers around the country is now starting to raise serious questions about the value of the curriculum for students and the efficacy of the tests as a meaningful measure of students' learning (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012; Strauss, 2013). We can trace the history and funding of the Common Core initiatives to the business world and groups such as the Gates Foundation, which provided significant funding for this work. How *public* are the public schools today if the bulk of the work that students and teachers are asked to do together has been determined by a small set of (often rich) advocates outside of education? Outside of parents and communities and school districts? Even outside of state government? Until recently there has been little media attention to these aspects of the Common Core. Those in education may know a great deal about these concerns, but there is so much outside this lens that escapes parents' and community knowledge until it comes home to roost with their classroom. When students start to fail, the teachers are on the frontline—not the business community who funded and implemented the material with little teacher intellectual knowledge.

How do teachers change this public perception that they are entitled and nonintellectual public servants? What sorts of skills are necessary for teachers to do the hard work of intellectually engaging in teaching _____ democracy? The intellectual work that is needed to teach for democracy is nuanced, driven by a sense of judgment about when and how to act or respond, purposeful, and inclusive of advocacy for students, teachers, and families.

Teach for America (TFA) is one large-scale example of how this often does not happen in schools. TFA's description of the process for identifying teachers for its program states: "We recruit a diverse group of leaders with a record of achievement who work to expand educational opportunity, starting by teaching for two years in a low-income community" (Teach for America, 2014, para. 1). TFA also states in a website tagline that it is "growing the movement of leaders who work to ensure that kids growing up in poverty get an excellent education," which certainly seems to be a useful societal and democratic goal valued by those with the power to influence change. While individual TFA candidates may have admirable goals to offer better opportunities for underserved children, the model of TFA—short preparation for teaching, short contracts in very high-need communities, and teachers who leave when their time is up—is realistically undoing exactly what TFA candidates purport to want to do (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Lackzo-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Entering a community and teaching with little knowledge of the nuances of professional practice actually deintellectualizes the profession, providing further tension and chaos in the lives of schools and students who are already struggling to achieve. The national press, and many educational foundations, may speak highly of TFA but local examples (see, for example, Dixon, 2010; Miner, 2010) show that it is hard on schools and antithetical to the notion of a participatory, equitable, democratic public education system. Changing the narrative to help the public see that teachers are on the front-lines of preserving democracy for all by preparing the next generations of citizens is not a small task, but it is one that must be tackled.

Conclusion

Teaching is an intellectual endeavor. Teachers are more than technicians who implement the latest fix and then move on. The best teaching and learning that anyone experiences require great effort on the part of the teacher *and* the students. In my opinion and experience, "those who can't do, teach" (Shaw, 1903) is a fallacy in most situations. This paper raises more questions than it answers, but they are questions that I believe need asking, researching, and exploring because they may offer insight into how best to nurture the quality teachers seeking to enter the profession and those already in schools. I believe in the intellectual nature of teaching, and I will continue to support rigorous standards of and for our teachers and ensure that I value their intellectual work with students, as I agree with Bradshaw (2014) that this practice is foundational to a democratic education and society.

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