

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

SHIELDS, CAROLYN M. *Courageous leadership for transforming schools: democratizing practice*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers. (2009). 235 pp. Paper \$49.95. (ISBN 1- 9933760-26-5)

Courageous Leadership for Transforming Schools: Democratizing Practice is a thoughtful call to action for educational leaders. Carolyn Shields writes as both an academic and an activist committed to social justice. She relentlessly explores the limits, and pushes the boundaries, of commonly accepted notions of democracy within her text. She draws on the foundational educational theory of John Dewey (1916), Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, the more recent contributions to the fields of critical theory and democratic citizenship education of Michael Apple (1979, 1993), Maxine Greene's (1988, 1998) work, and many others. In spite of its US context, the relevance of this text for a Canadian readership, particularly given the current national political climate, should not be underestimated.

Shields' work is a highly accessible combination of theoretical explorations, historical examples, and personal anecdotes. Her text begins with two contrasting accounts of the same spotlight school: a school honoured by the state for academic performance despite the high level of student poverty. While one administrator expresses pride in the school's sixty percent success rate, the other calls attention to the forty percent of students who find their needs unmet and ignored. These disparate accounts of the quality of this school serve to illustrate the opposing conceptions of democratic education explored throughout the book. Chapter three traces the history of inequality in US schools from the assimilation of American Indians, to the repression of African Americans, and the marginalization of Asian immigrants and Mexican Americans. These well-chosen illustrations serve to highlight longstanding traditions and current incidents of discrimination and inequality in US society. Through these, Shields shepherds her readers toward a critical understanding of education, citizenship, and democracy. What is perhaps even more useful is that she develops her readers' capacity to share their critical perspective with students, colleagues, and fellow citizens. The questions for reflection at the end of the

book, conveniently divided by theme, make this text equally interesting for use in the classroom as well as discussion in the boardroom.

The first section of the book, *Education and Deep Democracy*, looks extensively at the relationship between democracy and citizenship: “Democracy is much more than voting or decision-making; it is a way of life that requires equality in institutional, civic, and private spaces” (p. 53). Dissatisfied with the commonplace conception, that renders democratic education meaningless, and which equates “civic education with the development of skills related to constitutional democracy and a market economy,” Shields implores readers to critically (re)consider this crucial concept (p. 4). This reflection is taken as fundamental to the capacity for action. The author traces the origins of the injustices that pervade the US educational system and delves into many current challenges to democracy that exist both within and outside of it. She examines social privilege, systemic oppression, and barriers to participation—particularly as they relate to race, class, gender and sexuality—in educational settings and beyond. Shields problematizes the conception of education as a private good, and examines the ways in which formal education has functioned to preserve a socially unjust status quo.

For Shields, democracy requires not merely equality, but equity of both access and outcomes. She holds that schools should be communities in which learning about democracy means actively practicing and participating in democratic citizenship. She laments that currently “democracy” is mostly taught through an informational approach that provides students with “facts” about democracy. In such a static framework, “facts” are not only largely incomplete and uncritical, but more often than not abstracted from students’ practical lives. This approach does precious little to prepare culturally, socially, and economically diverse students for the realities of active participation in a democratic society. Instead, she argues that “to promote enlightened understanding, we must teach students to do what society as a whole has not learned to do: to ask critical, probing, and meaningful questions” (p. 56).

Taking up and expanding upon the foundational concepts explored in the first part of the text, the second section, *Transformative and Courageous Leadership*, explores the paths that educational leaders might take in order to promote “deep democracy” in schools. Chapter four examines the values and virtues on which democratic schooling might be based. Shields calls attention to the principles of tolerance, absolute regard, and trust as being fundamental to democracy, and suggests productive ways in which educators can address the inevitably conflicting values and beliefs held by diverse students and colleagues. Chapter five brings to light the choice that we face as a society, between creating, supporting, and nurturing schools as democratic communities, or strengthening existing institutions and their entrenched barriers to equity. The last chapter explores how transformational leaders might address diversity and attend to

the lived experiences of a diverse population of students. Shields insists that teachers are simultaneously learners. Emphasizing the importance of learning in community, with and from one another, Shields draws attention to the importance of attending to students' lived experiences (p. 163). Although there is no one way to do democratic education, Shields asserts that if we wish to transform education, "the change must begin with us" (p. 188).

The great strength of *Courageous Leadership for Transforming Schools: Democratizing Practice* is that the text goes far beyond an astute critique of the current system. It is clear that education in the United States is in crisis. As schools increasingly earn merit based on performance evaluations and standardized test scores, it goes without saying that children, who for any number of unjust reasons find themselves at the margins of US society, are progressively underserved. By making explicit the injustices deeply imbedded in the school system, and then mapping out ways in which educational leaders can move forward to foster deep democracy, Shields provides an invaluable contribution to educators working simultaneously for academic excellence and social justice.

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