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Conceptualizing Education Policy in Democratic Societies

(pre-print version)

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Abstract

While theorists and policy makers agree that schooling should be democratic, what this exactly means often varies. This paper establishes a conceptual model for analyzing education policy in democratic societies, based on the key concepts of equality, diversity, participation, choice, and cohesion. The model facilitates the design, evaluation, comparison and analysis of education policy in democratic societies. It also facilitates analysis of the interrelationship of the five concepts and the ways in which they both complement and conflict with each other. By providing an integrated view of the five democratic values, the model can help policy makers and analysts balance competing demands on education policy. Finally, the model improves understanding of the ways in which educational systems continually adjust to changing theory and economic, political, and social forces, and therefore has the potential to help explain and predict educational change.
Introduction

While scholars and policy makers in democratic countries agree that education should be democratic, what exactly this means can vary dramatically by one’s national identity and cultural traditions, ideological stance, theoretical perspective, and academic discipline. Indeed, the relationship between education and democracy is so wide and deep that it is often difficult to arrive at a basic mutual understanding that can transcend borders of all kinds. Moreover, different groups tend to focus on different aspects of the relationship. While this is natural in a relationship that crosses disciplines and that is highly complex and variable, it may be problematic if we lose sight of the larger picture.

Another problem with discussing democratic education is that embedded in the relationship are contradictory and competing tensions. These tensions are rooted in liberal democratic theory, and therefore are natural and even inevitable in democratic societies (Paris, 1995). While this ensures that the relationship between democracy and education is dynamic, it can lead scholars and policy makers to privilege certain conceptions despite a lack of analytical coherence. It may also diminish understanding among individuals from different theoretical perspectives or cultural traditions that emphasize some values over others.

Defining democratic education is difficult because both concepts are extremely broad and open to interpretation. There are hundreds of books alone that relate democracy and education to each other in some form. Despite this complexity, theorists often use the term democracy loosely, assuming a shared definition with the reader. A simple but telling example comes from Codd and Sullivan’s (2005) edited volume on contemporary education policy in New Zealand. In the very first line of his introduction to the volume, Codd (2005, p. p. xiii) writes: “Throughout the 1990s
education policy in New Zealand was largely shaped by neoliberalism and was therefore antithetical to democratic values." He then discusses alternative education policies without further elaborating on his first claim. Indeed, the claim is stated as so obvious that it does not require further discussion. And yet the question remains, what exactly is undemocratic about this particular trend in education policy? Certainly neoliberalism has many critics among education scholars. There are real worries that the market approaches central to neoliberal policy are increasing social division, segregation and differential student performance outcomes in such countries as the UK (Willms, 1996), Sweden (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006) or New Zealand (Lauder & Hughes, 1999) and therefore undermining democratic concepts such as equality and cohesion. Yet Codd’s sweeping statement leaves the reader with a normative rather than analytical understanding of education policy and democracy. Why exactly is it undemocratic? Are there any potential democratic aspects of neoliberal education policy?

Another example of blurry conceptualizations of democratic schooling can be seen in discussions of post-communist schooling. Studies of English-language scholars’ perceptions of post-communist European schooling reveal a significant negative bias (Perry, 2003b, 2005b), similar to that found by Wedel (1998) in other policy sectors. Perry’s studies found that the main theme underlying these negative perceptions is that post-communist schooling is undemocratic. Scholars included in Perry’s studies argued that post-communist schooling is undemocratic because curriculum and instruction focuses too much on rote learning and facts, and not enough on higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and problem-solving. From this many scholars deduce that post-communist schools are not adequately preparing students for active citizenship. They also argue that the differentiated and selective (as
opposed to comprehensive) structure of secondary education prevalent in central European countries is undemocratic because it rigidly sorts students into separate academic and vocational schools, thereby reproducing social inequalities and promoting a form of elitism that is seen as inherently undemocratic.

While these charges are to a large extent accurate, it could be argued that there are many democratic aspects of education in the post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe (Perry, 2003a, 2004, 2005a). For example, differentiated secondary education is elitist in its selectivity, yet it is also equitable because high-quality, rigorous academic education is widely accessible to all able students and is free. This type of education in many countries, especially the Anglo-Saxon ones, is typically only available in public schools serving wealthy communities or in expensive private schools that again primarily serve the wealthy. Thus, it can be seen that secondary education in central Europe is undemocratic because it is selective and elitist, rigidly sorts students into separate institutions without much flexibility for movement, and reproduces social inequality. On the other hand, it is democratic because it provides greater access to high-quality academic education to all able students regardless of their socio-economic background, family wealth, or place of residence.

Both of these examples illustrate the complexity of evaluating education policy. Educational systems in democratic countries are rarely completely democratic or undemocratic. Rather, systems are more likely to exhibit degrees of democraticness, with the ultimate aim being to become as fully democratic as possible. In addition, the ways in which education policy is conceived as democratic often varies by national context. Given this great variation in emphasis, priority and
interpretation, a model is necessary to facilitate evaluation of democratic education policy.

To facilitate such an analysis, I have designed a theoretical model based on five key concepts from democratic theory: equality, diversity, participation, choice, and cohesion. It will be argued that these five concepts are the basic ingredients by which the “democraticness” of a particular educational system or policy can be analyzed and compared with others. As an analytical tool, the primary benefit of the model is to enhance our understanding of the complexity of the relationship between education and democracy, and to provide a theoretical framework for designing, analyzing, evaluating, and comparing education policy in democratic societies.

The paper is structured as follows. First I provide a general theoretical overview of democratic education, and then follow with another limited to education policy in democratic societies. In the main body of the paper, I introduce the conceptual model and discuss each of the five key concepts. Before concluding, I also examine a particular education policy to illustrate how the model could work in practice.

The paper is limited to education policy in democratic societies. While the model could potentially be used to analyse other aspects of education such as classroom teaching, it is not within the scope of the paper to extend the discussion beyond education policy. The relationship between democracy and teaching and learning in schools and classrooms is a vast topic with a large body of literature, and would deserve a separate examination of its own.

Limiting the paper to education policy also provides conceptual clarification. The link between teaching and learning and democracy is primarily about education as a means to promote democratic outcomes. For example, civic education, critical
thinking, classroom discussion and student councils develop particular skills, values, attitudes, and behaviours in students. These qualities then help students become active citizens, which ultimately serves to strengthen and rejuvenise the larger democratic society. Democracy is thus an educational outcome. In this paper, however, I will examine policies and practices for the ways in which they are democratic or undemocratic, not the particular democratic outcomes they may promote.

**Overview: Democracy and Education**

Before discussing the conceptual model of democratic education policy, a brief overview of significant theorists of democracy and education will help situate the paper into a larger context. Theory on democracy and education is large and wide-ranging. For the purpose of this paper, I will concentrate the discussion mainly to the work of Dewey, one of the first and most significant theorists of democracy and education. I also include a brief discussion of Freire and Giroux as two key critical theorists who address the relationship between democracy and education. Discussion of these latter theorists is brief, however, since their work is more concerned with classroom practice than education policy.

While Rousseau, Jefferson or even Plato or Aristotle considered the relationship between education and democracy centuries ago, John Dewey was perhaps one of the first educational theorists to examine the topic in depth. In *Democracy and Education* (1944), first published in 1916, Dewey discusses both the democratic qualities and outcomes of educational policy and practice. In terms of democratic outcomes, Dewey agrees with the commonly held notion that education must help develop an informed and active citizenry. More importantly, however, he argues that education must also promote a collective sense of good, “personal
initiative and adaptability” (p. p. 88), and a “personal interest in social relationships
and control, and the habits of mind which secure social change without introducing

In addition to these democratic outcomes of education, Dewey also theorizes
about democratic education policy. In Dewey’s vision of democratic life, society is
open, dynamic and mobile, with multiple and varied shared interests and modes of
contact between individuals and groups. Democratic social institutions can be
evaluated for the degree to which “the interests of a group are shared by all its
members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups.” (p.
99). As social institutions, educational systems should follow the same broad aims of
promoting interaction and shared understandings and interests among diverse groups,
such as social classes or ethnic or racial groups.

A common thread underlying much of Dewey’s philosophy and theory of
education is the dynamic interrelationship between diversity and cohesion. Whether
discussing curriculum or the class structure of society, Dewey stresses integration,
connection, relationship, and cooperation, while criticizing isolation, fragmentation,
division or separation. For example, he argues there should be a diverse offering of
curriculum and instructional approaches to ensure that all students can reach their
maximum individual potential. At the same time, Dewey argues that curriculum
should not be fragmented into isolated, discrete components, nor should social classes
or other groups be restricted to particular types of education, such as vocational
education for the working class and academic education for the upper class. Rather,
Dewey argues for a diverse array of curriculum that is integrated into a larger whole
and that is open to all. Individual preference and need, not social class or other group
characteristic, should determine one’s educational path from a diverse offering. In
sum, Dewey’s vision of democratic education is that which embraces and caters to the rich diversity of individual students and groups, while at the same time fosters integration, communication and relationship among the diverse bodies.

Another perspective is provided by emancipatory, transformative and critical theorists of education. According to these theorists, education is democratic inasmuch as it leads to the liberation of oppressed classes and transformation of oppressive social structures. Democratic education is that which empowers individuals to free themselves from oppressive circumstances. Freire, one of the most influential educational theorists of the 20th century, argues that the path to liberation comes through critical awareness of one’s reality (Freire, 1992). Educational practices that support this aim are democratic and liberating. Freire argues that students can become active subjects of their own destiny when they are in control of their learning. He therefore advocates a student-centered approach to learning rather than the “banking model”, wherein the teacher-as-expert transmits knowledge to students for their passive consumption. Instead, the teacher should serve as a change agent, helping students to critically engage with their reality and eventually transform it.

Expanding on Freire’s insights, Giroux agrees that a primary role of education is to empower students to transform the larger society. Criticizing earlier sociological theories for their heavy emphasis on education as a mechanism for class domination, Giroux argues that schools are also sites of struggle, conflict and negotiation (Giroux, 1989). In other words, students are not just passively acted upon by more powerful forces in society. They also interact with and challenge these forces, and in this way schools are “democratic public spheres,” (p. 131) sites where students can participate in the betterment of their society.
While seemingly disparate, Dewey, Freire and Giroux share two common themes. First is that education is an important vehicle for both individual and societal development, growth, and transformation. The second is that education should be both democratic and democratizing.

Theories of Democratic Education Policy: Plurality, Conflict and Balance

Theorists of education policy agree that democratic societies embody a plurality of viewpoints that often conflict and compete with each other. A number of studies have examined the conflict between two or three democratic variables in particular education policies. Examples include Howe’s (1992) study of the tension between cultural diversity and equality of opportunity, and Levin’s (2002) study of choice, equity and cohesion in public vouchers.

From a more general perspective, Paris (1995) argues that educational reform and policy rests on particular values and ideas about the role of schools in a democratic society. A defining characteristic and indeed requirement of democracy is that there is a plurality of viewpoints. This plurality extends to all public institutions and policymaking, including education. Paris notes that this plurality of viewpoints inevitably leads to conflict among competing interests in society. Different groups may privilege different values, and these values may compete with each other. For example, employers may favour education that develops workplace readiness and human capital skills, teachers may seek education that prepares for active citizenship and lifelong learning, and parents an academic education that ensures their child the best chance of being admitted to a university. Which conception to favour, then?
Similarly, different groups may agree on a particular value, such as equal opportunity, but interpret the value differently or disagree how best to address it. Some groups may argue that equal opportunity requires a minimal standard of educational provision while still accepting large differences in quality or resources by school. Other groups, however, may charge that equal opportunity means that all students of similar ability and motivation should be on equal footing to be admitted to a tertiary institution. Such a stance would argue against a minimal standard of educational provision that permits wide variance in school quality and resources. In another example, affirmative action for underserved students to be admitted to a university could be argued as both promoting and hindering equal opportunity. Proponents of affirmative action may argue that underserved minorities in the US, such as Latinos and African-Americans, do not receive equal opportunity in primary and secondary schooling, and therefore universities should give certain students preferential access to compensate for this gap. Critics, however, may claim that such preferential treatment goes against equal opportunity. And finally, particular groups may react differently to the same process depending on the context. For example, majority Euro-American students may be critical of affirmative action for university placements when the recipients are Latinos or African-Americans, but supportive of such practices when they limit the overrepresentation of Asian-American students in elite universities.

Paris argues that competition and conflict about values is to be expected. Even if consensus can be found on broad basic values such as equality, interpretations and approaches will vary and often conflict. The challenge for policy makers and analysts, then, is to find common ground among competing ideologies. While this is often difficult, he argues it is better than focusing solely on supposedly pragmatic, non-
ideological policy proposals. Without an adequate understanding of the underlying value assumptions, these so-called pragmatic proposals are difficult to evaluate. We have to be clear about the ultimate vision in order to evaluate whether the policy has been effective.

Fowler (2004) also acknowledges a spectrum of values relevant to education policy. She categorizes the values into three groups based on the American context about which she writes: general social values (individualism and order), democratic values (liberty, equality and fraternity), and economic values (efficiency, economic growth, and quality). Due to the wide range of values relevant to education policy, it is inevitable that there will be conflicts. For example, she notes that the pursuit of efficiency can undercut quality, and unrestricted freedom can undermine equality.

Fowler argues that while most people would support in principle the above stated values, they prioritize them differently. The majority of citizens would support equality and freedom in education, yet individuals often vary in their support for specific policies. And no single education policy can support all values at the same time. The key challenge is to balance potentially conflicting values as optimally as possible. Fowler argues that the best way to do so is to seek compromise by addressing a core set of central values. Focusing on all values at the same time is impossible, and focusing exclusively on one or two is bound to alienate a large number of stakeholders.

In summary, theorists acknowledge that a range of values are relevant to education policy in democratic societies. Because of the plurality inherent in democratic societies, conflict among values is to be expected. Based on this acknowledgement of conflict, democratic education policy is a balancing act of competing interests, values, and interpretations.
The Model and Democratic Theory

In the previous two sections I briefly outlined theories about education in democratic societies. In the rest of the paper, I will introduce and discuss a conceptual model of democratic education policy. The model incorporates five key concepts derived from democratic theory: equality, diversity, participation, choice, and cohesion.

All five concepts are firmly grounded in common beliefs about democracy. A minimal definition of democracy is a system of political governance wherein citizens choose their representative leaders. There must be at least two parties to choose from; by definition, one-party states are not democratic. A more comprehensive definition of democracy includes the conditions, norms, rights and responsibilities of citizens and the state. For example, in a democracy all citizens are equal before the law. No one’s vote counts more than anyone else’s, all laws apply to all citizens, and the legal system bans discrimination based on gender, race, etc. While real life does not always meet these standards of equality, they are nonetheless considered official norms and as such, breaches can be litigated.

Diversity is embedded in our views on plurality in a democracy. We acknowledge that there is more than one way of looking at the world, more than one way of conceptualizing the good life. A plurality of opinion and the rights of minorities more generally are legally sanctioned, for example, by the US Constitution’s Bill of Rights. Moreover, a plurality of opinion and freedom of expression are generally promoted as advantageous.

In a democracy, individuals are citizens rather than subjects, and thus it is implicit that individuals have the right to participate in their own governance. They can do so by electing representatives and running for office, voicing their opinions,
and being involved in decision making in community institutions and voluntary organizations. Active participation is seen as a key element in a healthy democracy. Declining numbers of citizens who vote or who are involved in voluntary and community organizations has made some scholars wonder whether democracy is in decline (McGinn, 1996; Putnam, 1995).

Finally, democracy requires basic consensus about the rules of the game. Citizens must feel that together they are playing the same game (democracy) and that they make up a collective or cohesive whole. This in turn requires a certain level of trust, solidarity, and interconnection among citizens (Rose, 1996; Schnitter, 1997). Without a firm sense of cohesion and togetherness, it is difficult to consolidate a democracy. Individuals feel less committed to the state and overall society, and instead exhibit behaviour that favours family, clan or group over the greater common good. For example, countries with deep ethnic cleavages have a more difficult time consolidating political democracy than more cohesive countries (Reilly, 2001; Wallensteen & Sollenberg, 2000).

In addition to being firmly grounded in everyday conceptions of democracy, the model’s five key concepts are explicitly mentioned in the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Article 1 includes the concepts of equality and cohesion: “All human beings are born free and equal … and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” (italics mine). Article 2 elaborates on the notion of equality, stating that all individuals are equal regardless of any ascriptive or acquired characteristics: “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” (italics mine). Article 3 states that all individuals are
equal before the law: “All are equal before the law and are entitled without any
discrimination to equal protection of the law.” (italics mine).

The Declaration states that citizens be guaranteed freedom of expression and opinion, thereby promoting diversity and plurality, as well as an individual’s right to choice. Article 18 states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” In terms of participation, the Declaration clearly states in Article 21 that all citizens have the right to participate in governance: “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.” (italics mine).

The Declaration specifically addresses education in a democratic society. The guiding principles are of choice (and therefore also diversity) and equality. Article 26 states that there should be free and guaranteed access at the primary and secondary levels, and equal opportunity to study at tertiary institutions based on merit:

*Everyone has the right to education.* Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. .. and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (italics mine)

Article 26 also states the right to choice of an educational path: “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.” (italics mine). Finally, Article 26 states that the aim of education should be to promote tolerance, respect and understanding, all of which contribute to solidarity and the overall cohesion of the society: “Education shall … promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups…”

The above discussion shows that the model’s five key concepts are grounded in everyday understandings of democracy, democratic theory, and a major international document on human rights and responsibilities. They are thus relevant to all democratic societies regardless of national and cultural context. Moreover, the list
of key concepts is comprehensive and yet discrete enough to permit meaningful analysis.

The model’s five key concepts are similar to Fowler’s (2004) list of democratic values of equality, fraternity, and liberty. I have reworded fraternity to cohesion to make it more comprehensive. As such, it includes the concepts of social integration and inclusion, respect, trust, tolerance, identity, and solidarity. The concept of cohesion is essentially about the relationships among citizens and between citizens and the state.

Freedom or liberty is a guiding principle, yet I omit if from the model for two reasons. First, freedom is such a basic principle that we cannot talk about democratic education without already assuming basic freedom; it is inherent in any discussion of democratic education. Second, as Fowler (2004) notes, freedom in education policy primarily means freedom to choose an educational pathway, participate in educational decision making, and express diverse opinions and worldviews. Freedom thus incorporates three distinct concepts. Keeping these concepts under the larger heading of freedom would make analysis of education policy more difficult. For the goal of simplicity and clarity, I have therefore divided freedom into the three distinct concepts of participation, choice, and diversity. Table 1 illustrates the five key concepts that comprise democratic education.
Table 1: Conceptual Model of Democratic Education

The Five Key Concepts

- Equality
- Diversity
- Choice
- Participation
- Cohesion
The Key Concepts in Practice

In this section, I will discuss some of the various ways in which the five key concepts of democratic education policy are approached. For the purposes of this paper these approaches shall be sketched in brief and are in no way comprehensive. I will also highlight how the concepts complement and conflict with each other.

Equality

Education for and through equality is one of the most basic democratic principles guiding education policy. Equality of opportunity and outcome are considered major democratic promises and challenges of education. Moreover, schooling is the primary process by which social inequalities are reproduced, and at the same time is the main vehicle for social mobility. Education is shaped by the principles of equality. At the same time, education contributes to both equality and inequality in the greater society.

In democratic societies, all young people have a right to an education. Indeed, schooling is mandatory in most democracies for at least 8 years to ensure that no one is denied an education. All students, regardless of geographic residence, must be provided access to some form of schooling. Providing free education at the primary and secondary level is also considered democratic because it ensures that all students, regardless of socio-economic status or financial resources, have the equal opportunity to gain an education and develop their potential to the benefit of themselves and the greater society.

Most democratic societies consider an equitable distribution of resources to schools a basic democratic value. Schools should receive enough funds to be maintained at a minimum standard, and there should not be large differentials of
funding, at least among public schools. To this end, most democratic countries fund their schools from central or state/provincial/regional funds to minimize large differences in school funding. The US, with its heavy reliance on local funding, is a notable exception. Indeed, per pupil funding in the US can range by over 400 percent (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Numerous lawsuits have challenged these funding formulas, arguing that they are inequitable and therefore undemocratic. The dominance of local funding has remained, however, because most stakeholders believe it preserves their democratic right to participate in educational decision making.

The extent to which schooling does not serve disadvantaged members of society is a significant problem. In the modern world, education is the most important mechanism for social mobility. At the same time, it is the major vehicle for reproducing class privilege and social inequality. In the US in particular, with its large numbers of underserved students, issues of equal opportunity to education, the main mechanism for both mobility and reproduction, are paramount. Numerous studies have documented inequalities in the provision of education by race, class or ethnicity. For example, poor African-American and Latino students are more likely to have unqualified teachers or be shunted into less demanding courses (Jencks & Phillips, 2000; Oakes, 1990, 2000; Orfield, 1996), resulting in lower educational outcomes for these students. Jencks and Phillips (2000) argue that promoting equal educational outcomes between Euro- and Africa-Americans would be a significant mechanism for promoting equality of earnings. According to their research, lower educational quality resulting in lower educational outcomes is the main reason why minorities earn less than their Euro-American peers.
In terms of curriculum policy, some theorists argue a common core curriculum for all students is democratic because it ensures equal access to knowledge. For example, Hirsch (1997, 2006) and Ravitch (1984) both argue that there is a shared body of cultural knowledge that is essential for active citizenship and participation in the greater society. They argue that all students, regardless of socio-economic background or place of residence, should have access to this type of curriculum so that all have equal access and opportunity to participate in the society and culture. While in the US many consider this a retrograde and elitist perspective, it is also at the foundation of the Nordic model, wherein a nation-wide core curriculum is considered essential for equality and thus democracy:

One fundamental principle of the Swedish education system is that all children and youth must have access to equivalent education, regardless of gender, place of residence as well as their individual social and financial background. The curricula and timetables are valid nation-wide.” (EURYDICE, 2003).

Most OECD countries, including the UK, also have a core curriculum.

On the other hand, there are distinct and potentially undemocratic disadvantages of a core curriculum. First, who decides what the core curriculum will contain? How can we ensure that all groups’ interests and needs are represented, not just those of the ruling class, dominant majority, or major textbook publishers? Related to this, how can we ensure that the needs and interests of local areas and regions are adequately addressed? And third, how comfortable are we with centralizing power and control over the curriculum to a governing body? All of these questions are essentially about the other democratic concepts of diversity and participation. These two concepts are particularly strong in the US, with its diverse populations and long tradition of local decision making.
Another critique of a core curriculum is that it might not adequately address individual students’ diverse range of needs, abilities and interests. While a core curriculum could ensure that all students have access to a body of knowledge deemed important for active participation in the society, it could also revert to a conservative and classical approach that privileges some subjects and instructional styles over others. The danger of such a curriculum is that it could be irrelevant for many students. Dewey for one would argue that this type of curriculum could potentially be undemocratic, because it may not adequately address individual student diversity:

School facilities must…secure to all the wards of the nation equality of equipment for their future careers. Accomplishment of this end demands not only adequate administrative provision of school facilities… but also such modification of traditional ideals of culture, traditional subjects of study and traditional methods of teaching and discipline as will retain all the youth under educational influences until they are equipped to be masters of their own economic and social careers. (Dewey, 1944, p. p. 98).

Rather than using the same curriculum or instructional approach for all students, equity and fairness often require different approaches for different students.

In summary, education policy is democratic inasmuch as it supports equality of opportunity and outcome for all students, and promotes social mobility rather than reproduction. Designing such policy is not without complications, however, as it may conflict with other democratic values such as participation and diversity. The challenge, then, is to find a way to promote equality of opportunity and outcome while at the same time respect the diverse needs and desires of individuals and groups, and encourage widespread participation in educational decision making.

**Diversity**

As foreshadowed is the previous section, diversity is a key democratic concept in education policy. Democracies allow and encourage a plurality of opinion,
viewpoints, and philosophies. In addition, many democratic countries, especially those that have historically embraced large numbers of immigrants, have culturally diverse populations. Even the more homogenous European countries are experiencing an increase in cultural diversity as they struggle to meet the challenges of a diminishing population and aging workforce. All countries, of course, have students diverse in ability, motivation and interest. Diversity therefore takes a number of forms, all of which impact education policy.

Education policy can respect plurality of opinion and worldview in a few fundamental ways. These policies are so basic that they are taken for granted in most democracies. Looking at education policy under undemocratic regimes can highlight how basic, yet fundamental, these principles are. For example, during the communist regimes in central and eastern Europe, the state designed and mandated schools to use the same curriculum, and had a complete monopoly on education (i.e., private or independent schools were illegal, as was homeschooling). In terms of freedom of expression, very little diversity of opinion was allowed beyond the state mandated ideology. Once communism ended, the first wave of education reforms concentrated on increasing diversity (and choice). Private schools could be legally established, Marxism-Leninism was removed as the sole ideological viewpoint allowed in schools, and educational pathways were made more flexible (Cerych, 1997). In addition, diversity in the core curriculum was increased by creating three distinct core curricula and by allowing schools to alter subjects and timetabling to meet their particular local needs.

Addressing cultural diversity has become a major focus in many democracies. Multiculturalism is a philosophy that advocates for the equal status of diverse cultural groups within a particular society. Most democracies have policies that protect the
legal rights and entitlements of all residents regardless of cultural background. At a more developed level of multiculturalism, policies protect the rights of cultural groups to maintain their distinct culture rather than assimilate to the dominant one. This latter form of multiculturalism is contentious in many countries and in many areas of public policy, including education.

Multiculturalism in education takes a variety of forms. First, multicultural education is about ensuring that the voices, experiences, and contributions of cultural groups are represented in all aspects of education, including curriculum, textbooks and children’s books, and school staffing. There are three main rationales for this form of multiculturalism, two of which benefit primarily minority students and one which benefits all students. First, it may reduce the marginalization of minority students in the larger society (Grant, 1992). Second, it may make education more relevant for minority students, thus increasing their academic motivation and achievement (Asante, 1991). And third, it enhances all students’ ability to actively engage and participate in a diverse and pluralistic society. As Banks (1993, pp. pp. 4, 12) notes:

Multicultural education is an education for functioning effectively in a pluralistic democratic society. Helping students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to participate in reflective civic action is one of its major goals… Students must become critical consumers of knowledge as well as knowledge producers if they are to acquire the understandings and skills needed to function in the complex and diverse world of tomorrow. Only a broad and liberal multicultural education can prepare them for that world.

Benign as they may sound, these aspects of multicultural education are not without controversy. The canon wars raged especially strong in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in a polarized debate about what type of knowledge about cultural and ethnic diversity should be included in the curriculum (Banks, 1993). The flames of this
debate have subsided but not disappeared, as the debate about what exactly should be included in the curriculum continues.

The second major form of multicultural education is about ensuring that all students, including those from cultural minority groups, have a chance to succeed in school. This often means adapting instructional practices to respect students’ cultural background and traditions. It also means ensuring that teachers are culturally responsive and adequately trained to teach in culturally diverse settings (Sleeter, 2001). Altering educational practice to meet the needs of minority students is democratic because it ensures that all students, not just those from the dominant culture, have equal access to adequate schooling.

Ensuring equal access to education is particularly challenging for linguistic minority students. Research has shown that these students, also known as English Language Learners (ELLs), do not achieve equal outcomes with native students unless they have received at least four years education in both their first and second languages (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Very few linguistic minority students in the US are afforded this opportunity. Calls for an official language, especially in border states with large Latino populations, have made efforts to provide ELL equal access to education especially problematic. It should be noted, however, that these relatively recent developments have a long history in the US. For example, American Indians have been denied the right to education in their own language for over 150 years (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002).

Other countries have been more successful in acknowledging the rights of linguistic minorities. Canada, with its French language schools in Quebec and dual French/English language schools in the English speaking provinces, is an obvious example. Throughout the former communist countries of eastern and central Europe,
linguistic minority communities have their own schools that use the minority language for instruction. For example, the Czech Republic, a nation of 10 million people, has 28 Polish schools (Institute for Information on Education, 1998), effectively serving all of the sizeable Polish communities in the country. Similarly, Russia provides its three largest linguistic minority groups education in their native tongue for their entire school career (Kerr, 1994).

**Participation**

Participation as a key democratic concept in education policy revolves around the notions of power and control, self-determination, and decision making. It includes the rights of families, communities and stakeholders to participate in educational decision making at the local level. Mechanisms for this participation include PTAs (parent-teacher associations), school boards, local funding of schools, teacher unions, and decentralized school administration and governance. Such mechanisms are firmly embedded in American collective notions of the appropriate model of educational governance and decision making. For example, it is likely that most educators and the lay public alike would not support a national core curriculum because it would remove local control, illusory or not, over schools and the content of instruction.

For many American theorists, participation is the cornerstone of democratic schooling. In her seminal work *Democratic Education* (1999), Gutmann examines questions of control and participation in education. She argues that citizens should have the right to control education, while ensuring that future citizens retain this right as well. In other words, citizens and local communities must have the authority and means to shape education, but at the same time, this power must be limited to ensure
that the democratic foundation and promise of education are maintained. The argument rests on the insight that democratic means can promote undemocratic ends.

Citizens, broadly conceived, should have the right to control education, but the principles of non-discrimination and nonrepression must be respected. Non-discrimination means that no student should be discriminated against receiving an education necessary for adequate political participation. Nonrepression means that no particular worldview or ideology should be repressed. Citizens may democratically control education, but they must not deny a child an adequate education, nor impose any one view of the good life. By meeting these two basic requirements, citizens can have democratic control while ensuring that the outcomes of their control are democratic as well. For Gutmann, democratic participation in education centers on notions of equality and plurality. Plurality of worldview or ideology must be respected, and a minimal definition of equality must be supported.

Other important American theorists of democratic education have similarly stressed the key role of participation. In their book *Democratic Schools*, Apple and Beane (1999) are especially critical of “national standards, a national curriculum, and national tests” (p. 3), trends which they argue are undemocratic because they remove the locus of control from the school and community to a higher, centralized authority. By contrast, they argue that “democratic schools are marked by widespread participation in issues of governance and policy making” (p. 9) by all stakeholders, including students, parents, professional educators, and the larger community.

In her introduction to the *American Educational Research Journal’s* special issue on education and democracy, McNeil (2002) similarly emphasizes participation as a key aspect of democratic schooling. For example, she argues that public schooling in the US is democratic because it allows for local funding, governance and
participation in educational decision making; private schooling, by contrast, is 
undemocratic because control is held in “corporate hands” outside the community. 
She also agrees with Apple and Beane that standards and accountability are 
undemocratic trends because they centralize control and thus reduce local 
stakeholders’ right and ability to participate in decision making. 

As mentioned earlier, the main undemocratic aspect of local participation in 
educational decision making is that it can exacerbate educational inequality. 
Decentralized governance allows large inequalities in the educational resources 
available to schools, to the disadvantage of underserved communities. Privileged 
groups, on the other hand, are able to use avenues for participation to their advantage. 
Taken together, both dynamics strengthen inequality. 

Choice 

A dominant version of choice in democratic education policy revolves around 
school choice. Choice of school can be exercised by either the student and family, or 
the school itself. In the latter case, schools select their students, typically based on 
their academic ability or some other talent. While selective primary and secondary 
schools are not common in the US and other countries with comprehensive 
educational systems, they are very common, in many European countries. Selective 
schooling has been argued to be undemocratic since the mid 20th century, primarily 
because it reproduces educational and social inequality. For example, selective 
schooling restricts access to disadvantaged students (West & Hind, 2006), increases 
school segregation by student socio-economic status (Jenkins, Micklewright, & 
Schnepf, 2006), enlarges the achievement gap between students (OECD, 2005), and 
reduces the overall level of achievement within a country (OECD, 2005). On the other
hand, selective systems of secondary education are institutionally diverse, and therefore offer students and families a variety of educational pathways from which to choose. This degree of institutional diversity and choice is one reason why selective secondary education has endured in many countries, despite the heavy criticisms laid against it (Ertl & Phillips, 2000).

The choice debate in most countries, including the US, is currently focused on parental school choice, however. Proponents of parental school choice argue that choice increases competition between schools and therefore increases educational quality. They add that this is democratic because it has the potential to improve poor people’s access to quality education (Glass, 1994). Recent empirical research in the US has been mixed or even negative, however (Abella, 2006; Lubienski, 2006). In addition, opponents argue that school choice undermines social cohesion and a sense of the public good (Miller-Kahn & Smith, 2001). They also add that the main beneficiaries of school choice are the privileged middle and upper classes (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Lauder & Hughes, 1999). Families from educationally underserved communities are actually less likely than their more privileged peers to take advantage of school choice (Kristen, 2006; Wells & Crain, 2000). The potential of school choice to concentrate disadvantaged students in segregated schools may result in a deteriorating quality of education. Thus, in a variety of ways, school choice is undemocratic because it exacerbates inequality.

Yet as noted earlier, parents’ right to choose a type or form of education for their children is considered a basic human right by the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights. Some countries, such as Denmark, Holland and Australia, have a long history of church sponsored schooling. These and many other countries provide significant state subsidies to religious (Christian, Islamic and Jewish) schools; in some
European countries, religious schools are completely subsidized by the state and are therefore public. The rationale for such subsidies is that while it is the state’s responsibility to ensure all children receive an education, the state is not necessarily the best provider of education for all students. School choice also offers religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities the opportunity to receive an education that respects their worldview without being financially penalized, and that does not require them to assimilate to the dominant society. Many countries fund special and separate schools for minorities because it is believed that they support the democratic right to choose an education that respects one’s culture.

School choice thus has the potential to be both democratic and undemocratic. The democratic aspects of choice, i.e. the ability to support participation and cultural diversity, are likely to be predominant if the factors that lead to undemocratic aspects of inequality and segregation are mitigated. As Fowler (1992, p. p. 429) notes in her study of French state subsidies to parochial schools, “choice policies may work best where major equity problems have already been resolved.” Even in countries where equity problems are not overwhelming, school choice should be very carefully managed to prevent the individual right to choice from trampling the individual right to an equitable education, or the collective right to a society based on tolerance, respect and trust. To this end, Lauder and Hughes (1999) recommend school choice, for example specialist immersion schools, for ethnic minorities and other underserved groups, while a much more limited form of choice for majority students.

**Cohesion**

Cohesion is an overarching concept that includes notions of integration, solidarity, identity, membership, trust, and inclusion. It is essentially about the
relationships among individuals, groups, and the state. Cohesion is the glue that holds
individuals together into a greater whole – community, group, or nation.

As discussed earlier, Dewey argued that the need for diversity in curriculum
and instruction should be counterbalanced with the equally pressing need for holism
and integration, concepts which are essentially about cohesion. Education policy can
promote cohesion and integration in a number of ways, including racial and ethnic
desegregation of schools, inclusive education for differently abled students,
comprehensive secondary education for students of mixed abilities, interests and
socio-economic backgrounds, and a strong system of public schooling. All of these
mechanisms can integrate students that differ by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic
background, and academic ability, interest and motivation into the same educational
structure, and thus promote cohesion among diverse individuals and groups.

Educational policies that promote integration and cohesion are important for
both educationally privileged and underserved students. School segregation of low-
income students decreases the educational resources available to them and their
academic achievement, eroding equality of opportunity and outcome (Dronkers &
Levels, 2006; Orfield, 1996); conversely, integration leads to better outcomes.
Schools that integrate students from different backgrounds may also increase
tolerance and respect among groups, although this area has not been extensively
researched. In addition to reducing educational inequality for underserved students,
school integration of students from diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic
backgrounds can have positive cognitive and affective benefits for majority students
as well (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004). The benefits of attending ethnically and
racially diverse schools for majority students is an emerging area of research,
especially in higher education. Understanding the benefits of cultural diversity at the
primary and secondary level is becoming increasingly important as school choice and privatization become more relevant (van Zanten, 2006).

As school choice becomes more common, mechanisms for educational self-selection (and thus segregation) take on different forms and perhaps even grow. In some countries, school choice is leading to increased school segregation of educationally disadvantaged students. For example, open enrolment among public schools has increased the segregation of Maori youth in many schools in New Zealand (Lauder & Hughes, 1999). In Germany and the Netherlands, religious (Catholic and Protestant) schools, which do not charge tuition because they are completely subsidized by the state, have become the main mechanism for middle class parents from the ethnic majority to avoid schools with large numbers of Muslim immigrants (Karsten & Teelken, 1996; Kristen, 2006; Noreisch, 2007). Choice is less likely to be supported if it threatens to erode rather than enhance self-selection and privilege. For example, voucher programs in the US that enable low-income urban students to attend wealthy suburban schools are likely to encounter resistance (d’Entremont & Huerta, 2007).

**An Example: Education Policy for Linguistic Minorities**

In this section, I provide an example of a concrete problem in education policy, and use the model to show why one approach to the problem is more democratic than the alternatives.

Lau v. Nichols, the landmark 1974 US Supreme Court case, ruled that schools must provide linguistic minority students special provisions to prevent discrimination based on national origin. Schools and districts have most commonly interpreted this ruling by offering one-to-three year transitional bilingual programs, the ultimate goal
of which is to mainstream English language learners (ELL) into an English-speaking school. These programs are thus transitional and remedial, not enriching. In other words, the goal of these programs is to develop English skills by underdeveloping skills in students’ first language. Dual-language programs that seek to develop ELLs’ abilities in both their first and second languages, as well as develop native English speakers’ proficiency in a second language, are much rarer (McEachron, 1998; Nieto, 1993).

From the perspective of the academic outcomes of ELLs, dual language programs are much more effective than remedial or transitional bilingual programs, which in turn are better than no bilingual education at all. One of the largest studies of language and academic achievement in the US has found that linguistic minority students need at least four years of schooling in both their first and second language before they can achieve on grade level (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Moreover, the study found that dual-language enrichment programs in which native and non-native English students learn two languages together were the most successful for removing the achievement gap between these groups of students and developing bilingual proficiency.

In addition to being more effective, dual-language enrichment programs are also more democratic. First, they are the most effective solution for promoting equality of educational opportunity and outcomes for linguistic minorities. Second, they promote diversity. Rather than forcing students to lose their native tongue so that they can assimilate into the larger society, they preserve linguistic minority students’ right to preserve their language and culture, a right which UNESCO has argued is essential for all children and families. Third, dual language programs have the potential to promote the equal participation of linguistic minority students in schools.
Proficiency in the mother tongue is considered an asset rather than a deficiency in dual-language programs (McEachron, 1998). Rather than being seen solely as learners on the periphery, constantly in need of catching up, they also have the opportunity to be experts. This power shift enhances ELL’s status and relationships with their peer group and teachers, and thus increases their sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Cohen & Lotan, 1995), both of which could foster engagement and participation in the school. Fourth, such programs can potentially promote cohesion by reducing prejudice against minority students and fostering cross-cultural awareness and friendships (Cazabon, Lambert, & Hall, 1993).

Historical studies of education have shown that language pluralism in schools is associated with political pluralism and democracy, while political authoritarianism is associated with the repression of minority languages. In their study of schooling in Ukraine and Spain, Petherbridge-Hernandez and Raby (1993) found that minority languages were banned in schools under the autocratic rule of Stalin and Franco. After one-party rule ended in both of these countries, education language policy was liberalized for linguistic minorities. It is thus feasible to argue that linguistic freedom in schools can be used as a criterion for evaluating the extent to which a particular country’s schooling has reached its full democratic potential. In their study of American Indian schooling, Lomawaima and McCarty (2002) make this very point, arguing that the federal government’s English-only language policy has undermined the US educational system’s democratic ideal.

**Conclusion**

There are many tensions and contradictions inherent in education policy in pluralist, democratic societies. The model advanced in this paper contributes to theory
on education policy in democratic societies by explicitly integrating all five concepts – equality, diversity, participation, choice, and cohesion – into a whole. This ensures that none of the concepts are ignored or assumed, and provides a way for all of them to be kept alive in discussion or analysis. Given that there will always be tension, competition and conflict among groups regarding education policy, integrating the concepts together into a comprehensive whole keeps the larger picture in sight and hopefully serves as a framework for understanding the complexity of the project.

The paper has briefly discussed the ways in which the key concepts interact with each other. Sometimes they complement each other; for example, research shows that equality can promote participation and choice. McGinn and Street (1999) found that large levels of inequality within a society inhibit the degree to which significant portions of the population can participate in educational decision making and effectively choose among educational paths or institutions. Likewise, equality can promote cohesion. Societies with large amounts of inequality are less cohesive: individuals are more likely to think in terms of “us/them” and to blame the poor for their problems. In the US, communities that are more cohesive (often because they are more ethnically or racially homogenous) are more likely to support funding for public education and other public goods than less cohesive ones (Alesina, Baqir, & Easterly, 1999).

As has also been shown, however, the key concepts sometimes contradict each other. For example, high levels of participation can undermine equality. In the US, the heavy reliance on local funding of schools promotes participation but results in massive inequities in resources and student outcomes. School choice can work against equality of opportunity and outcome by fostering segregation.
Educational practices and structures can be argued democratic or not depending on the underlying key concept. For example, a national core-curriculum is arguably democratic as it ensures all students have access to the same knowledge, yet undemocratic inasmuch as it removes local participation. A strict separation of church and state in public schools may promote cohesion by downplaying religious differences, but undermine cultural and religious diversity by forcing religious minorities to conform to the dominant world view, ideology, or civil religion.

Different countries will adopt different education policies based on their unique historical and cultural context. There is no best fit approach applicable to all contexts. Researchers need to acknowledge that very few education policies are purely democratic or undemocratic. On the other hand, international research, theory and practices can help researchers and policymakers best balance the competing demands in their own context.

It is hoped that this model of democratic education will assist the design and evaluation of education policy. If, for example, we would like to increase choice, what other key concepts need to be supported in order to maintain our maximal democratic potential? When evaluating or analysing education policy, the model can provide a conceptual framework for considering other dimensions of democratic education. This will ensure that we keep sight of as large a picture as possible, rather than focusing too exclusively on concepts that are politically expedient or ideologically fashionable.

The model should also facilitate cross-national comparison of democratic education policy. It is difficult to compare national systems of education when the variables are unclear. It is hoped that this model will aid cross-national comparison by
clarifying the key concepts of democratic education while at the same time increasing our understanding of their complexity and great variation.

A potential weakness of the model is that it could be used to support a form of cultural relativism or educational conservatism. On a national level, policy makers or analysts could argue that their respective educational systems are uniquely democratic along one or two dimensions, and use that as a basis for refusing to be compared with other countries as less or more democratic, critically analyse their own policies, or continually seek progress. The same dynamic could occur at the local or regional level within a particular country as well. While increasing our understanding of the complexity of evaluating education policy in democratic societies, the model should be used to find critical and creative solutions to policy challenges, not justifications for the status quo.

Finally, the model has the potential to predict and explain educational reform. In their study of Swedish educational restructuring, Arnesen and Lundahl (2006) note that there was surprisingly no political or academic controversy when school choice and other neoliberal market reforms were introduced into a system marked by an overriding commitment to equality and social cohesion. The authors do not attempt to answer why this was the case in Sweden, yet insight would be useful, especially since such restructuring has been controversial in other nations.

The conceptual model of democratic education would suggest that systems that are heavy on some concepts but light on others will attempt to “right” themselves. With its strong achievements in educational equality and cohesion, the Swedish case might have been such an attempt to find balance by introducing choice and diversity. Similarly, this could explain educational change in post-communist Europe, as these nations introduced choice and diversity into systems that had been completely lacking
in them. It could also explain why the development of school choice and privatization has progressed slower in the US than in most other OECD countries. The public and experts alike may be wary that increasing choice in an educational system plagued by extreme educational inequality could capsize rather than right the boat.
References


