

Review of

## *Democratic Discord in Schools: Cases and Commentaries in Educational Ethics*

by Meira Levinson and Jacob Fay, eds., Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2019

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American philosopher John Dewey warned a century ago that democracy should not be taken for granted but should instead be consciously reproduced by citizens. He argued that, as institutions *for* democracy, public schools should play a central role in this process. Also situated *in* democratic societies, however, public schools are inevitably affected by the social and political conditions that exist beyond their walls. Citizens of the deeply divided democratic societies of the present, for example, disagree about what particular civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions schools should teach and how they should be taught. As a result, these societies tend to de-emphasize civic education, leaving students ill-prepared for democratic citizenship and likely exacerbating problems of polarization and disengagement. Working with the public to develop constructive, democratic solutions to such problems is, therefore, an important project. Levinson and Fay's recently published book, *Democratic Discord in Schools*, is a prime example of this type of scholarship and should be of interest to philosophers of education.

The book uses cases and commentaries to illuminate and provoke discussion about democratic dilemmas in educational policy and practice. Each of the eight cases is followed by six commentaries written from the diverse perspectives of teachers, educational leaders and policy makers, scholars from a variety of disciplines, middle and high school students, community leaders, and other stakeholders in education. The cases are drawn from real scenarios in the United States, though commentators from Singapore, England, South Korea, the Netherlands, Mexico, Ireland, Germany, and Australia add international perspectives that should broaden the book's appeal and increase its relevance to readers in other diverse democratic societies. The last chapter highlights the text's major themes and provides recommendations for how it might be used in practice.

The cases and commentaries explore themes of vulnerability and protection, examining issues "with which schools must contend, and/or that they risk perpetrating: harassment, bullying, racism, suicide, deportation, silencing, ignorance, marginalization, gang violence, segregation, civil liberties violations, arrest, suspension and expulsion, physical violence, emotional violence, job loss, and so on" (p. 275). Additionally, the contributors problematize educational policies and practices pertaining to the "regulation of teacher speech, policies around charter school design, school culture initiatives, ... digital monitoring of students, ... choices about curriculum, district partnerships with law enforcement, teacher

preparation and support, and districtwide responses to student activism” (p. 272). Each case was written to be read on its own without preparation, is under six pages long (as are the commentaries), and can, therefore, be quickly read prior to or as a prompt for discussion.

The book’s final chapter provides guidance and resources for educators and discussion facilitators. It includes a protocol to guide deliberations (p. 278), creative ideas for engaging with the cases and commentaries, and the link for a website that contains additional resources for facilitators ([justiceinschools.org](http://justiceinschools.org)). Drawing from personal experience leading such deliberations, Levinson and Fay recommend that facilitators spend at least an hour discussing each case, but they also include suggestions for how to limit the scope of the discussion when time is limited. They recommend small breakout discussion groups of five to ten people with facilitators pausing the conversations periodically to highlight and share important insights across groups. To minimize unproductive conflict, the authors recommend that groups collectively establish discussion guidelines prior to engaging with one another about the cases.

Additionally, the book provides multiple examples of pedagogical strategies and activities to guide discussions (e.g., “four corners,” “fishbowl,” “town hall,” philosophical seminar, visual and artistic representations of key tensions and choices at stake in a case, “found poems,” “readers’ theater,” etc.) (p. 279). Furthermore, they suggest that students might be encouraged to write original commentaries from different perspectives, interview stakeholders and write reflective essays, extend cases through role-playing exercises, continue dialogue where a case ends, and make connections to dilemmas faced in their own experiences. Practicing and pre-service teachers, the editors suggest, might also construct original cases or develop lesson plans to engage their own classes in discussion.

Levinson and Fay suggest that the book might be useful for courses in “teacher education, educational leadership and administration, social studies methods, civic education, educational policy, political theory, philosophy of education, public policy, school law, race and multiculturalism, and related areas” (p. 271). They also envision the text as a means through which to initiate and guide “conversation in departmental and faculty meetings, parent-teacher organization evenings, school board development sessions, student government meetings, middle and high school classes, city halls, and state houses” (pp. 271-272). While their book can be usefully applied to teacher education, educational practice, and policymaking, Levinson and Fay also intended it to “push scholars to engage in a practice-centered, multidisciplinary ethics” (p. 11). In that regard, I consider its major scholarly contribution to be its application of “normative case studies” and “phronetic inquiry” in educational scholarship.

Social scientists have used the normative case study approach to address research questions that do not lend themselves to strictly empirical or philosophical modes of inquiry (Thacher 2006). This type of work has also garnered recent attention and support in philosophy of education. For instance, Levinson was a co-editor for a special edition of *Theory and Research in Education* published in early 2015 that focused exclusively on empirically engaged philosophy of education. A special issue of *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, also published in 2015, laid further significant groundwork for this approach. *Democratic Discord in Schools* builds upon these previous efforts to bring philosophers of education into constructive engagement with social scientists and to incorporate empirical findings from other related fields more systematically into educational theorizing.

Normative case studies use tools of both empirical research and philosophical inquiry, which together provide a helpful approach for addressing matters of fact as well as matters of value, aiding the researcher’s efforts to clarify problems and identify constructive responses to those problems. The empirical components of this approach ground the philosophical questions in an authentic case that

offers realistic challenges to commonly held normative principles. The philosophical components of the normative case study, in turn, help to address questions such as, “so what?” or “where do we go from here?” in reference to the empirical findings of a study. When seeking to determine which policies to support in relation to a given social or economic problem, philosophical inquiry can be highly beneficial because it allows for in-depth consideration of how policies relate to the things we value.

Normative case studies thus offer a productive tool for informing and clarifying public values. Public values are those values that provide “normative consensus about (1) the rights, benefits, and prerogatives to which citizens should (and should not) be entitled; (2) the obligations of citizens to society, the state and one another; and (3) the principles on which governments and policies should be based” (Bozeman 2007, p. 13). They can be particularly useful for helping policymakers think about the ends and not just the means of public policy. They can help professional communities to clarify, elaborate, or even fundamentally revise the way they define these ends. For instance, normative case studies can help us to determine, “what a good city neighborhood should provide ..., what responsibilities organizational leaders should attend to ..., or when military intervention is justified” (Thacher, 2006, p. 1632).

Furthermore, philosophers’ engagement with social science can also make fundamental contributions to ethics, such as helping scholars in their efforts to theorize concepts like justice. By using illustrative cases, the researcher can provide examples to the reader that draw attention to the complexities of particular notions of justice. Exemplified in *Democratic Discord in Schools*, such considerations are especially salient in the context of K-12 public education. For example, contributing author Terri Wilson presents the case of a charter school for children of Somali immigrants in Minnesota (pp. 147-152) that highlights tensions among competing values that citizens prioritize in different ways: libertarian perspectives that emphasize school choice as a parental right, egalitarian perspectives that prioritize integration in service of social equality, and identitarian perspectives that endorse voluntary segregation as a means of preserving culture and/or promoting collective identity.

Normative case studies can also contribute to ‘value rationality’ by using ‘practical reasoning’ to inform judgments about both the intrinsic value of an action and the value of its consequences. These characteristics make the normative case study approach especially appropriate for educational research, particularly for providing analysis and evaluation of educational policy and practice. Levinson and Fay’s use of normative case studies in education, however, has less to do with product (i.e., prescribing policy or arguing for what ought to be a normative consensus in regard to public values) than with process (i.e., providing tools and guidance for democratic processes that might diminish conflict and develop pragmatic solutions). They opt for a problem-focused form of scholarship they call “phronetic inquiry: an approach that synthesizes theory and practice by combining philosophical insight, social scientific analysis, and practical expertise” (p. 6). It also acknowledges the importance of contextual factors that are often overlooked in appeals to general moral theories. It starts with the fact of disagreement and—rather than aiming for universal agreement on contentious moral issues—encourages educational stakeholders with diverse perspectives to engage across difference in good faith, with mutual respect for their fellow citizens.

The influence of *Democratic Discord in Schools* outside of colleges of education may turn out to be more limited than the authors hope. Nevertheless, I consider the book a welcome contribution to ongoing efforts from scholars in education and other fields to offer constructive paths forward from the present conditions of political polarization and the other daunting challenges facing our fragile democratic institutions. Levinson and Fay’s approach broadens the ‘tent of inclusion’ by including thoughtful

representations of perspectives often absent in educational scholarship. For that reason alone, the book is worth reading and using as a model for constructive engagement across difference. Its realistic approach offers a refreshing alternative to both idealistic and overly cynical narratives about the prospects for productive pluralism and democratic education.

### References

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### About the Author

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