

# Relationship between democracy and education



Schooling and education are strongly connected to the foundations of democratic societies all around the globe. There exists an important relationship between schooling and democracy that continues to get stronger as nations progress, especially the United States. Democracies are very difficult to uphold because we are always looking for new leaders and officials to run our country, so it is an ongoing effort to elect someone with the best policies. Therefore, there must exist a tenacious relationship between democracy and education because they support each other. It is the cultural elements of democracy that help shape public schools and are a means to help public schooling exist. From studying the teachings of critical pedagogy of Henry Giroux to the non-functionalist methodology of Samuel Bowels, I think the most significant aspect in the relationship between the philosophies of education and democracy is the fact that education and democracy must be interconnected in order to sustain a functional society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

Critical pedagogy is a concept developed by Canadian scholar Henry Giroux. He believed that knowledge is born through social interaction. Giroux, for some reason, was obsessed with the concept of power. He preached that the main purpose of education is teach students the social construction of knowledge and the framework of power and the only way to achieve this is through critical pedagogy. From my understanding, critical pedagogy is the connection between politics and education. Giroux's perspective explains that politics may already be embedded in education itself. He believes that there is an interconnection with knowledge, power and authority. That everything that was ever made, was created to for a specific political reason

and nothing was objective or neutral. We argued in class that humans cannot create anything neutral or objective because each object is designed to perform a specific task that could push a particular political agenda. I did not agree with his philosophy because his argument brings far too much politics into education. In his eyes, the only reason students should go to school is to gain the knowledge to improve the social and economic conditions of the world. " Giroux's concept of democracy extends to all spheres of life. He argues that not only government, but schools, corporations, and other institutions should be the sites of democratic struggle." (Spring, 25). For Giroux, a school becomes a democratic public institution that just shows kids how to maintain a democracy. I feel the need to agree with this because I think that students that go to public school do not get the same quality of education as students who go to a private school. Mostly because parents who can afford to send their kids to private school are well off and pay for their children's education while public schools are funded by the government. That being said it, only makes sense that the government would pay for what is required of schools to produce functioning members of society whereas private schools charge a tuition and have supreme control over how much money they get to maintain operations.

German philosopher Max Stirner's idea of " wheels in the head", is a perfect representation of the way people think in a democratic society. Stirner argued that any form of education has the potential to restrict the freedom of thought. The ' wheels' that Stirner is referring to are the thoughts that any individual has that he or she cannot give up. We talked in class about the two different types of wheels an individual can have: the qualitative wheels

and the quantitative wheels. The qualitative wheels are the cultural values that drive a person to think certain ways and the quantitative wheels are those physical, concrete values that influence peoples' decision making. For an example of a qualitative wheels, I was raised in a very traditional Italian family that values the idea of respect in specific ways. When I enter one of my friend's homes, it is natural for me to greet their parents and say goodbye to them when they leave. Also, if I am staying for dinner, it is a huge sign of respect to eat all the food and ask for seconds even if you do not like the food. In Italian homes, not eating all the food is considered disrespectful and no one wants to do that. It is these qualitative, cultural wheels that turn in my head that make me behave this way and it is all due to the way I was raised. On the other hand, a quantitative wheel would be something like if I am hungry, I will search for food. Similarly, if I was thirsty, I would search for something to drink etc. Those concrete needs are what forces my brain to make a decision on what's best to keep me alive.

Likewise, Stirner believes that States manipulate the public by implementing ideas in their heads that controls them implicitly by placing ideals in their head. That way, they do not feel like they are being controlled by the government but their own wheels inside of their own heads. It is those ideals that gain possession of people. It is this perspective that pushes people to sacrifice what they are for something that they ought to be in order to benefit society as a whole. In the case for schools, Stirner argued that they could establish an ideal that would teach its students to sacrifice themselves to preserve the state. This would be a qualitative wheel in the head that would influence the behavior of a state's citizens. I feel like Stirner had most of his ideas influenced by Karl Marx whom he claimed was a mentor to him.

These socialistic views have effects in universities here in the United States as well. Especially, in places that are highly liberal like Drexel University or highly conservative school like Bucknell University. There is no doubt that the teachers there implicitly and purposely push their political agendas to influence the thought processes of their students. That is why what most likely happens is they can fit it into their curriculum and the students never know the difference. I remember something like this happening to me when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade back when Barack Obama was first elected president. My history teacher was very liberal and tried to bring up Obama every time she got the opportunity to and wanted us to believe that he was going to be a great president with no evidence to support that. We were young, so nobody could really argue against it at that point. That is how critical pedagogy plays on role in public schools here in the United States.

Paul Goodman's theory of decentralization and free playgrounds is good way to describe how education and democracy work hand in hand. Goodman wanted an alternative form of education that was focused on mini schools and free playgrounds. He thought that increasing complex technology was causing people to lose control of their lives. Goodman would have rather had smaller decentralized schools that allow people to have a share in political control. According to Goodman's perspective, " Small schools would make it possible for students to share power in controlling their schools and, in addition, provide a better education." We discussed as a group that Goodman felt that public schools gave grades to students to rate their market skills. The solution to this was to create smaller more community-based schools. These smaller schools would help overcome the

powerlessness and loss of community experienced in contemporary urban life. He suggests that small urban schools can dispense with formal classes that use other teaching methods including streets, stores, museums, movies and factories as places of learning. The teachers in these facilities would be the workers of the specific establishment and would subsequently replace state-certified teachers. I am a little on the fence about this philosophy for a few reasons. While I agree that there are some things that need to be learned in an informal setting, it does not mean that all disciplines should be taught in this way. As an example, most people learn how to drive in a very informal manner. It is an important skill that people need to know and it proves that people are capable of learning in a setting that is not considered an institution. Also, our parents taught us how to speak but, in most cases, they did not teach us how to read and write or maybe even how to do mathematics. Those are reinforced by parents at home but not introduced to the kids at home. Giving the students a setting in which they are all around other children who are the same age makes them more willing to learn. This is also why Goodman wanted more playgrounds. He believed that when a child plays on a playground and has fun, they are learning important social skills that they would not have been able to learn in an institution. The playgrounds were an attempt at creating an environment where a child can exercise freedom which Goodman thought was very important in creating an ideal democracy.

Ivan Illich's plan to deschool all of society is another great example of how democracy shapes public schools. This idea circles around the idea that there cannot be universal education through schooling. What he meant by

this was that rich people could afford the best schooling and the poor people would only have the very lowest quality of education, thus automatically creating a social class between the rich and the poor. Illich argued that he did not want schools to teach the poor people to be dependent on technology. He feared that if poor people became dependent on technology and experts that they would be doomed to inaction; they would not learn how to think and act on their own which is not efficient in a modern society. I remember we talked in class about the reason why schools were set up in the way they are today. I agree with the fact that it is up to the poor people that are receiving this universal education to use it to their advantage to improve their current living conditions. Some of the most influential and successful people came from nothing. They had little to no money growing up and probably lived in the projects or were in and out of foster homes. Those people made the decision to change the way they wanted to live and put themselves through school to increase their chances of a better life. Also, Illich wanted students to be able to learn what they wanted to learn instead of being forced to take every subject in school which is something I very strongly agree with. Why should I, a young man who enjoys math and science as well as teaching, be forced to take history and art classes? Those subjects do not interest me at all, so I feel like it is a waste of time for me to take those classes in school. Illich says in his book *Deschooling Society*, "Matching people according to their interest in a particular title is radically simple. It permits identification only on the basis of a mutual desire to discuss a statement recorded by a third person, and it leaves the initiative of arranging the meeting to the individual." (Illich, 22). While I do not agree that public schools teach dependence on experts and institutions I do believe

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that his solutions to these problems would work had they been feasible to pull off.

There are a few ideologies from French socialist Pierre Bourdieu that most definitely describe the importance of the relationship between democracy and education. The first of which is known as “ habitus”. The concept of habitus refers to ingrained skills, habits and dispositions that individuals obtain throughout their life experiences. Habitus attempts to explain how humans navigate through social environments as well. An example that I like to use from own life, is the fact that I grew up in a poor neighborhood that was riddled with crime. Over the years, it became natural for me to know which areas of town to avoid. This is a skill that I developed from my life experience that has now become habitual in case I ever find myself in the same situation. This habitus is specific to my life experience and would be different for someone who perhaps grew up in a nicer neighborhood. Another topic that we discussed in class is that Bourdieu associated personal taste with habitus. Depending on what kind of taste a person has for a particular thing, it is how their social class is identified. For example, I am an admirer of the critically acclaimed movie *West Side Story* so if any person that I meet does not like that movie, I perceive them to be not as cultivated by the habitus of movies. Therefore, I associate them with a lower rank on the social hierarchy. The concept of habitus is unclear to most people because we mistake it for being innate within us instead of it being molded by society and culture. The education system draws parallels to this concept. Students who cannot adjust to how a school operates can be seen as lower-class citizen because they have not been exposed to it. I had something like this



happen in my own life when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. When I moved from Upper Darby to West Chester, which is a significantly wealthier town, my old school let students use calculators during math class. In fact, they handed calculators out to us to use for the whole year so that everyone had one. The new middle school, Fugett, did not allow math students to use calculators at my level. I was so used to using a calculator that when I transferred I thought that it was just universal that everyone got to use a calculator. This made me feel as if I was a lesser man, despite being on the same level as my fellow classmates. However, due to my experiences, I did not learn the same way that the rest of the students did, and it made me appear to be lower on the social hierarchy because of the way my old school was run. The idea of using calculator for math was ingrained in my head so it became my habitus while the other students' habitus was that they did not need to use a calculator for math. This became natural for both of us because of our previous life experiences which is the main focus for habitus.

Another one of Bourdieu's ideologies was his idea of what he called "social fields." Bourdieu viewed the structure of schooling as a game with the members of the school were all on a field and had certain jobs/responsibilities, similar to those of sports players say on a soccer team or football team. Correspondingly, these teams have leaders that operate them such as coaches or captains. Schools tend to behave in a similar way. Those students who are leaders dominate the social settings within a school or the "popular kids" would be like the captain of a sports team. Those who go above and beyond were seen as better than everyone else. The coaches are the faculty members of the school whether that be building

administrators or just teachers. Bourdieu mentions an interesting concept which is what he calls "zafar." "Zafar refers to students' dispositions, practices and strategies towards social and educational demands of teachers and their school." (Bourdieu, 350). From what I understand about zafar, it is what is called to students who do the absolute bare minimum to meet expectations set by the school. They neither excel nor fail, they only do what is required of them to pass. Evidence of this can be seen on a sports team. The most talented players on the team are the ones that spend hours of time training and studying to improve themselves while other players did only what was necessary of them to stay on the team. According to Bourdieu, this is what creates social inequalities within schools. This is also evident in the society we live in today. There is a strong connection with field of play and democracy because members of society also behave like members of a team. The wealthy people and politicians act as the captains and coaches while other members of society just put in enough work to get by. Those who work harder end up being more successful.

Bourdieu's final concept was cultural capital. For Bourdieu, capital is what dictated an individual's position in the social hierarchy. In other words, capital laid out the foundations of what it means to have a social life. However, Bourdieu extended this claim of capital from a mainly economic perspective into a more cultural perspective which he called, "cultural capital". According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is the set of resources or 'cards', which assumes different states. He said that, "Families and individuals' abilities, competences and embodied cultural resources are crucial to understanding educational success." (Bourdieu 1986). This cultural

capital is the set of symbolic elements such as taste, credentials, material possessions etc., is what gives a person an identity in a certain social class. For Bourdieu, this concept of cultural capital is major source of social inequality because of the way people perceive others who have different tastes or material belongings. When I was younger, an example of cultural capital was a bike. The nicer the bike, the higher you were in the social class. Therefore, I wanted a bike not for the bike itself, but I wanted to be perceived as cool by my friends. In a way, this idea of cultural capital is an embodiment of credentials and qualifications that identify an individual of being culturally accepted. This is another concept of education that strongly ties in with democracy. When an individual lives in a free society, it is important to build up a social and cultural capital. Those with higher levels of education have more social capital which dictates their place in the social hierarchy.

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