

Public Engagement for Public Education: Joining Forces to Revitalize Democracy and Equalize Schools edited by Marion Orr and John Rogers. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. 334 pp. ISBN 9780804763561.

Education and democracy have been linked rhetorically since the founding of our nation. At the turn of the 19th century, Thomas Jefferson declared of public schools, “No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness.” And just a few months ago, President Obama proclaimed in his Blueprint for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2010) that without a system of world-class education, “We will not remain true to our highest ideals [of an] equal, just and fair society” (p. 1). Indeed, a simple Google search for the phrase “education and democracy” yields nearly 90,000 results. What sets *Public Engagement for Public Education*, the groundbreaking new volume edited by Marion Orr and John Rogers, apart on this topic, however, is its clear and necessary reminder that the relationship between these two concepts is one of action rather than words. Through a series of conceptual and empirical essays, it provides an overview of vibrant efforts taking place around the country to inject the voices of students, parents, and community members into conversations around school reform. Orr and Rogers push their readers to re-think traditional notions of both “engagement” and “the public” in ways that have the potential to fundamentally alter the relationship between schools and society.

Orr and Rogers ground their exploration of public engagement in a discussion of educational inequality. They detail disparities not only in the quality of education that students from low-income communities of color in urban areas receive compared to their middle-class, white counterparts, but also in the extent to which schools heed the demands of parents and community members. They explain that privileged parents are successful in advocating for their students through traditional forms of engagement, such as meeting with teachers, attending PTA and school board meetings, and voting in local elections, while low-income parents and parents of color often face both formal and informal barriers to participation. Considering the democratic imperative that drives their view of the purpose of schooling, Orr and Rogers argue that these inequalities call for a redefined vision of engagement that goes beyond securing benefits for one’s individual children to advocating collectively for all children. As they describe it, “Public engagement is about translating shared interests into deliberate collective efforts to promote education equity” (p. 10).

This form of engagement, with its focus on collective action, in turn necessitates a new vision of the public as a citizenry with shared interests rather than a collection of atomized individuals. Orr and Rogers cite Harry Boyte’s concept of “public work” (Boyte, 2004) in order to stress the interdependency that

binds individuals as they seek to solve common problems and change the institutions that structure their daily lives. Using this redefined vision of “public engagement” as a starting point, Orr and Rogers organize the various forms of action that have sprung up around educational issues throughout the country according to the type of problems being addressed, the people who are being harnessed to create change, and the strategies being used to promote educational equality. Indeed, one of the major strengths of this volume is its creation of overarching analytical categories that can be used to organize the various types of public engagement that, up until now, have been studied individually. This typology ranges from more traditional forms of participation in school governance structures or community/business alliances to co-production of curriculum and grassroots organizing campaigns.

The inclusion of two chapters at the beginning of the volume that tackle the history and politics of public engagement in schools is absolutely critical to establishing the context within which the case studies that follow can be situated. While Orr and Rogers stop short in their chapters of naming systemic racism as a major impediment faced by urban students, parents, and community members to engaging in public schools, Dennis Shirley tackles the issue by constructing a convincing historical trajectory of exclusion; indeed, he explicitly links the “uneven distribution” of public engagement in schools to an “enduring legacy of inequality” (p. 29). Jeffrey Henig makes an equally important contribution by explaining in precise detail the changes in the political economy of education - from the push toward privatization and school choice to the changing demographics of the school-age population - that those who seek to engage with public schools must navigate. In keeping with the pragmatic tone of the book, this chapter does not editorialize on these political issues so much as call for an acknowledgement of them by those who facilitate engagement.

One of the most intriguing chapters in the book comes from Mark Warren, who in effect questions the accuracy of the very term “public engagement” and reveals important contradictions in how different actors theorize school reform and social change. Building on Dennis Shirley’s chapter, Warren argues that “the danger with the term *public engagement* is that it can hide race and class differences” (p. 141, emphasis in original). Indeed, he claims that the term “public” has been effectively narrowed to include affluent parents of the majority race while low-income students and parents have been marginalized both politically and educationally. He challenges all of the authors in the volume when he declares, “We aspire to be a public, but constructing an inclusive, democratic public requires confronting the current reality of division and exclusion” (p. 141). His description of community organizing efforts highlights the importance of creating opportunities from the ground-up that empower those most impacted on a daily basis by educational inequalities.

Warren puts community organizing into sharp contrast with another form of engagement described by Lauren Wells, Jean Anyon, and Jeannie Oakes later in the book; namely, alliances between business leaders, philanthropists, and school districts. While Warren acknowledges the importance of such partnerships, he warns that they often indicate a “top heavy” approach to reform by privileging the perspectives of “elites” and advocating for students and parents instead of actively involving them as stakeholders in the reform process (p. 140). In essence, Warren is raising an intriguing question that is never explicitly addressed in the book: Is the umbrella of “public engagement” able to comfortably contain various forms of involvement that operate from such different theories of action? Can top-down and bottom-up approaches operate simultaneously and harmoniously, and if so, how? While it would have been helpful to see these issues addressed in the concluding chapter, it speaks volumes about the intellectual breadth of this volume that it can explore such deep contradictions in a way that invites further study.

Indeed, Orr and Rogers leave the field with many questions to be explored. In the very first chapter, they discuss the difficulty of forging equality and a common sense of purpose in education when parents are constantly attempting to secure advantages for their own children that will better situate them in the global marketplace; in fact, they call this “a central paradox of the American dream as it relates to public schools” (p. 11). Readers are left to ponder to what extent is greater engagement in public schools by traditionally marginalized communities a step toward deliberative democracy and the creation of an inclusive “public,” and to what extent might it be a foray into power politics and contestation over scarce resources? The answer to this question has huge implications for the politics of education in this tumultuous time, and this book presents a reasoned and powerful start to this dialogue.

References

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Reviewer

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