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Democracy and education in contemporary local-global contexts

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This special issue takes up the call of the 2017 Re-imagining Education for Democracy Summit *to seek new ways to resist growing educational inequality and reframe educational policy and practice to better meet the diverse needs of communities. In a time of enormous challenges and complexity, where "thick" democracy is reduced to "thin" choice in markets, collective action and resistance is reconstituted as individual competition and civic virtue is measured by "likes" or clicks on social media, it becomes vital that educators and researchers find ways to speak back and resist the de-democratization of education across the world. In this issue, contributing papers provide a range of local and global perspectives on the problem of democracy in education, across multiple contexts, including schools, universities, and informal and non-traditional learning sites. Added to this are a range of international empirical research evidence from Australia, Brazil, Taiwan, Thailand, UK, and US, providing rich comparisons between systems, nation-states, and diverse communities. Each paper considers the question of how we might address the issue of democracy and education, applying a range of methodological, conceptual, and empirical tools to specific local-global education concerns. Taken together, they provide international and comparative perspectives on the different ways education might be re-imagined for democracy.*

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There is no doubt that democracy is in a profound state of crisis around the globe. The rise of authoritarianism seems to continue unchecked in all quarters, as seen in the advent of fascist and populist demagogues such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, the US's Donald Trump, Brazil's Jair Bolsanaro, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro and, of course, North Korea's Kim Jong-un. If the 20th Century can be understood as a time of significant global democratic progress—from women's suffrage to the breakdown of the British Empire, postcolonial independence movements, and the enshrining of liberal democracy as the standard for political governance—then perhaps the 21st Century will be remembered for the unravelling of global democracy. While it might seem like hyperbole to make such a claim, the strain on democracy is clearly evident in many ways. For example, it can be seen in the inertia of elected political leaders to address catastrophic climate change, the building of border walls and tough anti-immigration talk on national security, the revival of old tensions between Russia and the US, the flexing of Chinese economic and military power in the Indo-Pacific, the crippling

paralysis of Brexit, and the continued global funnelling of wealth and power to a few by corporate and political elites.

I recently came across news reports of Swedish 16-year-old climate activist, Greta Thunberg, who rose to prominence with a blistering speech to world leaders at the United Nations COP24 Conference, in which she declared:

> We can't save the world by playing by the rules. Because the rules have to be changed. So we have not come here to beg the world leaders to care for our future. They have ignored us in the past and they will ignore us again. We have come here to let them know that change is coming whether they like it or not. The people will rise to the challenge. And since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago (Thunberg, 2018).

The backlash from neoconservatives, alt-right activists, and corporate-owned media interests has been loud and vitriolic. Yet Thunberg is right: the rules have to be changed. We are staring at a nightmare scenario for our global future, which includes runaway climate change, mass extinctions, environmental degradation, and loss of biodiversity while simultaneously entering a time of catastrophic social decay, where the five richest people in the world share more wealth than the poorest 80%. Human displacement due to war, famine, and lack of water is unprecedented while nation-states around the world close their eyes and borders to the miserable suffering of millions of refugees. The rise and rise of neo-fascism in places where such things would have been unthinkable less than a generation ago gives further cause for alarm. The US has Trump, while we here in Australia have our own disgraceful bipartisan torture and indefinite detention of asylum seekers who came to us fleeing from persecution and asking for protection.

Of course, within the broader global breakdown of liberal democratic economic, social and political institutions and practices, there are some hopeful localized examples of how people are reconfiguring democratic power through collective acts of resistance and protest against rising social, political, and economic inequality. The Arab Spring, Occupy Movement, Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, and the Children's Climate Strikes are well-known examples of democratic movements. While there are some important lessons and hope to be gained from these collective uprisings, it seems that, for now at least, the corporate oligarchs and self-serving political elites continue to maintain their anti-democratic grip on policy-making and social reform. Perhaps some of the most perverse instances of education reform can be found in the world of corporate philanthropy, with notable examples including Pearson, Bridge Academy, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. These organisations see education as a commodity, much like any other widget to be packed and sold to consumers, providing for-profit education corporate solutions to much of the developing world. Democracy, or at least a thin version of something resembling democracy, is also sold to consumers through the mantra of choice, which is a dangerous illusion for all but the wealthiest families in the developed world.

Within this broader social, political and economic context lies our education systems: early childhood, formal schooling, and university and technical education alongside other forms of learning and teaching in different contexts. One of the key challenges facing educators is how to resist anti-democratic forces in education and come to some understanding of "what the potential role of education might be in equipping young people with the tools and knowledge to become powerful democratic agents of change in an increasingly unstable and dangerous world" (Riddle & Heffernan, 2018, p. 319). Given the state of the environment and collapsing political and economic systems, it seems clear

that we are at a moment of great importance. Continuing as we are in terms of such concerns as mitigating runaway climate change, tackling extreme social and economic inequality, and halting the erosion of our democratic institutions is not going to work. More radical activist efforts are required, including those of scholars and educators who work with young people on issues of local and global relevance. Education is at the heart of our efforts to reconfigure the social apparatus in more equitable and socially just ways, for both the sustainability of our communities and the planet. In short, the question we might ask ourselves is: given that things are in a bad way, what should be the response of education to work towards addressing these complex local-global crises? It is the proposition of this special issue that education should form a central part of our collective will to re-imagine our political, social, and economic systems and institutions in more sustainable ways. Part of this project requires re-imagining education for democracy.

However, any actions on the part of educators to re-imagine education for democracy is going to be met with resistance from parties who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. For example, one response of governments and education policy-makers in many places has been to double down on reductive and technicist modes of school governance, curriculum, and pedagogy, giving rise to further intrusions on the professional autonomy of teachers and the rights of young people to demand access to socially inclusive and supportive education opportunities. Regressive education "reforms" limit the freedoms of teachers to teach and students to learn, and, instead, promote education as a competitive enterprise that positions learners as entrepreneurial innovators within education markets, who must seek to maximize their competitive advantage and outcomes.

In his work on curriculum and education reform, Apple (2006, 2014) traces the history of neoliberal and neoconservative policies on schooling in the context of the US; his analysis resonates with many "developed" countries that have shared similar reform agendas. Take, for example, the rise of Academy schools in England, Free schools in Sweden, and the highly segregated schooling landscape in Australia (Bonnor & Shepherd, 206). Education, and schooling, in particular, has been successfully reconfigured from a public good into a private commodity, with profound consequences for teaching and learning. There is little room for democratic values and practices in school when the livelihoods of teachers depend on student achievement on standardized tests and the successful output of entrepreneurial global workers ready for the market.

This special issue takes up the call of the 2017 *Re-imagining Education for Democracy Summit*, to seek new ways to resist growing educational inequality and reframe educational policy and practice to better meet the diverse needs of communities. In a time of enormous challenges and complexity, where "thick" democracy is reduced to "thin" choice in markets (Apple, 2018), collective action and resistance is reconstituted as individual competition, and civic virtue is measured by "likes" or "clicks" on social media, it becomes vital that educators and researchers find ways to speak back and resist the de-democratization of education across the world.

In this issue, contributing papers provide a range of local and global perspectives on the problem of democracy in education across multiple contexts, including schools, universities, and informal and non-traditional learning sites. Added to these perspectives are a range of international empirical research evidence from Australia, Brazil, Taiwan, Thailand, UK, and the US, providing rich comparisons between systems, nation-states, and diverse communities. Each paper addresses the question of how we might approach

the issue of democracy and education, applying a range of methodological, conceptual and empirical tools to specific local-global education concerns. Taken together, the papers provide international and comparative perspectives on the different ways that education might be re-imagined for democracy.

In their paper, Bunn and Lumb reconceptualize the notion of agency in education, drawing on Barad's agentic realism. They consider how current formations of schooling and students produces undemocratic and hyper-individualistic forms of agency, suggesting that a careful rethinking of the ontologies of being in relation to education might produce something more akin to a realized democratic agency. In doing so, Bunn and Lumb argue that we need to think more in terms of the relational agencies of classrooms and other education encounters rather than view education through the lens of the autonomous individual subject.

Hardy, Reyes, and Hamid provide a compelling case for contesting instrumental and technicist approaches to teachers' work, replacing performative accountabilities with more authentic accountabilities. In presenting the empirical work on teachers in Queensland, Australia, they argue that teachers struggle to fully attend to their students' learning needs when they are beholden to a system that relies on contradictory practices and policies, emphasizing inputs-outputs, and standardized metrics. Hardy, Reyes, and Hamid suggest that teachers are not simply beholden to performative logics, because they can critique and exert agency in their professional practice.

In their paper, Cássio, Goulart, and Ximenes present a case study on the Rede Escola Pública e Universidade, a network of public Brazillian schools and universities in São Paulo that engages in radical acts of collective resistance to anti-democratic movements and counter the politics of injustice. They detail the relationship between knowledge production in schools and universities and the potential to generate democratic agency and mobilize for political action in the struggle for public education. Given the current political climate in Brazil, with the recent election of far-right president, Jair Bolsanaro, the work of scholars, including Cássio, Goulart, and Ximenes, is significant.

Djone and Suryani examine the issue of child workers in Indonesia and the harmful effects that child labour has on their access to education. Their project considers how teachers' perceptions of child workers in their classrooms influence their teaching choices, illuminating the lack of resources and capacity to deliver high-quality learning outcomes for child workers who come from disenfranchised backgrounds. Djone and Suryani propose a set of principles for engaging in more inclusive and democratic education practices in the classroom with child workers.

Udas and Stagg consider the ideological apparatus of the enterprise university, using the instrumentalist theory of state to examine how contemporary university systems in places like Australia, the UK, and US have become an ideological extension and auxiliary agent of the corporatized state. They argue that instrumental theory helps to explain why universities have seemed to willingly embrace neoliberal and managerial behaviours, rather than critically responding to them. Udas and Stagg suggest that the role of universities as spaces for democratic discourse and civic engagement is diminishing as they become increasingly bound up in legitimizing and reproducing the state apparatus.

In her paper, Li presents a detailed historical and contemporary account of Taiwanese culture, identity, and its path towards a national curriculum and the rise of student

movements. She examines the coercive effects of the national curriculum and official knowledge on representations of national community and identity. Li utilizes the conceptual tool of imagined communities to call for a more democratic, inclusive, and multicultural curriculum that is negotiated with and responds to the contextual needs of young people living in Taiwan that also provides them with the tools to critique the powerful dominance of official knowledge.

Writing from the Brazilian context, Travitzki and Kelian consider open architecture curriculum as an expression of democratic pluralism. They argue that open architecture provides pro-democratic possibilities for curriculum planning and delivery because it is a method of organizing real and virtual collaborative actions and concepts through heterogeneity transparency, flexibility, and intelligibility. Travitzki and Kelian go to some pains to examine the conceptual apparatus of open architectures and possible implications for more socially just, inclusive, and democratic curriculum and pedagogy.

In his paper, Duggan explores how the motif of digital disruption has been taken up by democratically elected leaders to influence political and policy action in response to globalized digital economies. In particular, he considers the case of coding in Australian schools, which gained significant policy attention as part of a discourse on 21st Century skills and literacies of the future. Duggan examines some of the contradictions and hidden costs of such future-oriented policy-making and politicking, suggesting that there are consequences for educational equity, access and participation.

Laing, Mazzoli Smith, and Todd round off this special issue, with their paper on relational justice and the conceptual exploration of dialogic fairness. They consider how a range of UK-based Fairness Commissions have attempted to grapple with reducing educational inequality while increasing access to educational opportunities and embedding democratic principles into education. Laing, Mazzoli Smith, and Todd propose a framework containing several principles of fairness in education, which they suggest might assist teachers, school leaders, and policy-makers to address significant educational inequality.

Taken as a collective, the papers presented in this special issue provide a compelling argument for the plurality of possibilities when it comes to imagining more democratic ways of living and learning in contemporary contexts. Authors write from multiple perspectives—theoretically, methodologically, empirically, geographically, and so on—yet, there is a sense of a shared commitment to the notion of an education that is for democracy. By this, I mean the daily practices of learners, educators, leaders, communities, and societies towards a collective wellbeing and increased civic participation.

Each paper in this issue presents a specific contextual issue relating to education in which collective action and struggles to embed democratic practices into the daily lives of educators and learners is paramount. These local examples of committing to education as a practice of freedom (Freire, 1972) provide important lessons for re-imagining education, which might be taken up by educators, policy-makers, and researchers in different contexts. There is a shared demand for more relational and authentic forms of accountability that reconstruct the current modes of reductive and technicist accountabilities in education. There is also a clear need to better understand the complexities of young people's lives and account for those who face multiple factors of deprivation and disenfranchisement.

Demanding more democratic modes of civic participation will not be an easy project, as has been demonstrated by the efforts of teachers, students, their families, and others who have engaged in collective acts of resistance. However, there is an urgent need to both resist authoritarian educational reforms that seek to minimize the freedoms of teachers and students while also finding new expressions of hopeful education in both local and global communities. There is no doubt that we require a radical re-imagining of education for democracy. And the time to start is now.

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