

McDermott, J. Cynthia. (Ed.). (1999). *Beyond the Silence: Listening for Democracy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 146.

Reviewed by Lydia Hammett

The book, *Beyond the Silence: Listening for Democracy* is a collection of stories edited by Cynthia McDermott that represent the voices of educators and students who share the dream and promise of democracy and social justice in the classroom. McDermott, who is a professor at California State University-Dominguez Hills in Los Angeles, California, values the principles and perspectives of critical pedagogy reflected in democratic education.¹ The creation of a democratic school or classroom is presented for elementary through secondary teachers as well as college level professors.

McDermott and the contributing authors share and address the essential elements found in democratic classrooms, including teaching practices, ideas, and techniques that support a holistic process through conflict resolution, community building, reflection, and authentic learning that are valuable in a linguistically diverse society. Therefore, drawing upon their knowledge and experience, the editor put together this book to encourage educators and students to take the steps and the journey to creating the environment for a much needed democratic learning in America's schools.

Democracy in the classroom is a process, yet it promotes a culturally responsive learning environment in which students participate in the curriculum by making choices and reflecting on their interests and learning goals, which according to McDermott and her colleagues, is an optimal educational environment for students to learn their best. The implementation of this process may involve time and practice, may present challenges in and out of the classroom, and may be difficult and unfamiliar to students who are asked to make decisions and take responsibility for their learning. However, *Beyond the Silence* is structured to serve as a reference for teachers who are already implementing democratic practices as well as novice educators who want to shift their teacher-centered pedagogical practice to one that promotes social justice, equality and student empowerment. Each chapter features the work of an "expert" (e.g., a teacher, teacher educator, or paraprofessional) and narratives from practitioners and students whose classroom experience is informed by that expert. For ex-

¹ Considering the perspectives of critical theory, critical educators are concerned with how descriptions, discussions, and representations in textbooks, curriculum materials, course content, and social relations embodied in classroom practices benefit dominant groups and exclude subordinate ones (McLaren, 1995).

ample, in Chapter Two, *The Curriculum Connection*, Hilton Smith, an experienced democratic teacher, addresses principles for project-centered learning that are practiced and evident in classroom experiences offered by the three separate narratives of two teachers and a student. In order to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the process of democratic teaching, McDermott conceptualizes, what I would consider, three main aspects to the establishment of a democratic educational environment: making decision about behavior and curriculum, creating a trusting learning environment, and encouraging reflection and self-evaluations for independent thinking and conflict resolution.

Teachers can move beyond the practice of behaviorism and create a classroom environment where students make decisions about their behavior and the curriculum. Teachers often practice the behaviorist process by providing students with rewards as motivators when doing work and giving punishments when work is not done to teacher expectations. Alfie Kohn, a former teacher who writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and social theory, discusses the concept of rewards, the approaches used by teachers to motivate students, and the struggles faced when trying to undo the detrimental effects of extrinsic motivators. Kohn recommends that teachers reflect on their rationale for “doing praise” and consider that “if we want kids to become sharp thinkers and people who are in love with ideas, we can’t choose...to motivate them from the outside” (p.13). The need for extrinsic motivators diminishes when students engage in curriculum that is satisfying, interesting, and is part of an authentic learning experience. The issues of shared student-teacher power and the coverage of curriculum by means of student participation, active learning, and responsibility are appropriately addressed through classroom experiences, however Kohn’s discussion on the concept of rewards has limited supporting examples.

Teachers can create a trusting learning environment and encourage social responsibility by providing students opportunities where they can work together and respect each other. Trust is the key ingredient in creating a democratic community of learners. The teacher needs to trust that his or her students will be responsible when they take on a learning challenge, students need to trust that their teacher will be there to help them understand as they process knowledge, and students need to trust each other as they problem pose and solve through teambuilding activities. For example, Jeff Hass, a high school English teacher at Downtown Business Magnets High School in Los Angeles, understands the reciprocal functions of education when his students demonstrate to him that they know the importance of teamwork, trust, and responsible learning behavior. Chapters three, five and eight provides examples of democratic learning experiences and describes specific social skills that teachers and students can use to build and creating a community of learners. McDermott and the contributing authors recognize that education with mandated curricula can be an obstacle to building a community in a classroom or a school, however they stress that teachers keep in mind that children need to be engaged in and develop skills that will prepare them to be active participants in a democratic society.

Perhaps most importantly, it is the trusting learning environment that serves as a foundation for other aspects of the democratic process to strengthen. Students need to feel that they

will be heard and respected for their opinions, especially during reflection and self-evaluation.

Teachers can encourage independent thinking skills and conflict resolution skills through the process of reflection and self-evaluation. Clifford Knapp, a professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Northern Illinois University, addresses the power of reflections while McDermott presents strategies and practices of self-evaluation in the classroom. When used as instructional tools, well planned and conducted, reflection and self-evaluation engages students in their learning process by helping them focus on the learning and their responsibility to it. Reflection sessions can be a powerful learning skill and an integral part of the student learning and thinking process, and can be implemented in any grade level. Kim Douillard and Jan Hamilton, who co-teach a first-, second-, and third-grade multiage class in Cardiff-by-the-Sea, share how reflection and “thinking about thinking” has deepened the learning experience of their students. By reacting and responding to knowledge, students improve their reasoning and problem-solving skills, and increase their critical thinking abilities.

Moreover, the process of self-evaluation encourages students to reflect not only on their learning, but on their behavior and on the choices they make when setting learning and working goals, analyzing quality work, and when making trustworthy decisions as well. Reflection and self-evaluation is a process that incorporates both teacher and students. In recounting her personal experience with self-evaluation in her classroom, Sharon Setoguchi, an English, Japanese, and Journalism teacher at Stephen M. White Middle School in Los Angeles, learned that trust is “the single most important factor in helping students become self-reflective” in the process of self-evaluation (p.112).

Overall, McDermott has woven together the essential elements that intertwine for the creation of a democratic educational environment. The strong positions heard by the contributors represent democratic voices in pedagogical decisions that affect diverse populations in education. A democratic pedagogy decision will leave readers feeling the need to go beyond the silencing that exists in many non-democratic classrooms today and to be more self-reflective in educational efforts that creates a culturally responsive learning environment. The journey, as suggested by the contributing authors, is not one without obstacles, yet it is an approach that is a process of continuum progress and growth. The challenges in transforming into a democratic teacher and abandoning the traditional classroom patterns where student voices are not heard, respected, and trusted, can cause uncertainty and distress. However, McDermott has put together this valuable tool in which an educator can consider a new task, one that will “demonstrate how classrooms organized around the rhythms and routines grounded in natural learning processes make democratic classrooms more practical educational places” (p.50).

References

McLaren, P. (1995). *Life in School: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy and the Foundations of Education*. New York: Longman.