

## The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education (Diana Hess & Paula McAvoy)

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Review of

## *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*

by Diana E. Hess & Paula McAvoy. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015

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Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy have written a significant book whose timeliness has only grown since its publication in 2015. The bitter divisiveness of the 2016 US presidential election makes it all the more urgent to consider whether and how students are learning to engage in substantive, civil discussion about political controversies. Recently published books that dissect this divisiveness and its underlying value tensions have captured the attention of readers trying to understand how the US electorate brought us to this moment (e.g., Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*; J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elogy*), which has emboldened divisive politicians in Canada and elsewhere. Readers of such books should also read Hess and McAvoy's book—not because it offers retrospective insights, which it does not, but because of its forward-looking, constructive approach. Hess and McAvoy's research is forward-looking in two important senses: in its focus on the political education of youth, who will soon be voters and otherwise civically engaged adults; and because it offers badly needed, evidenced-based guidance about how we can cultivate citizens who thoughtfully reflect upon their values, and who respectfully engage with others across differences of opinion.

In addition to its timeliness at this vexing political moment, Hess and McAvoy's book is also responsive to growing calls for scholars and practitioners to dedicate more attention to civic education. In an education policy climate that has prioritized STEM fields and preparation for the labor market, Hess and McAvoy's book stands out for its focus on civic learning that is happening in high school classrooms, and to what effect. Moreover, the interplay in their analysis between philosophy and empirical research illustrates why it is so important for these two modes of inquiry to be pursued together. By bringing conceptions of democracy and equality to bear on their findings, Hess and McAvoy sharpen our understanding of the goals of civic education, and the value trade-offs that may be inherent in achieving them.

*The Political Classroom* is divided into three parts. The chapters in the first section introduce the reader to the authors' conceptual framing and findings. This section's title, "Context, Evidence, and Aims," names the trilogy of components that they argue should comprise teachers' professional judgement about how to handle controversial issues in the "political classroom." Hess and McAvoy carefully distinguish political from partisan; they advocate that classrooms are political in the sense that teachers prepare students to engage with controversial issues tied to the foundational question about political life: *How should we live together?* But classrooms should not be partisan in terms of advancing a particular policy agenda or ideology. Hess and McAvoy recognize the paradoxical position this leaves teachers in: students must be educated in a nonpartisan manner to participate in the deeply partisan political culture that is today's reality. Beyond the fact of political

polarization, they also highlight social and political realities that challenge their ideal of diverse students deliberating together, including racial segregation and ability tracking in schools—realities I will return to in my discussion of the feasibility of their educational vision.

Chapter 3 describes the study's major findings. Hess and McAvoy's longitudinal study involved 1001 students and 35 teachers in 21 high schools across 3 states (Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin). Data collected include classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, and student and teacher surveys. Students who were in classrooms that Hess and McAvoy characterize as exhibiting "best practices discussion" (i.e., where students discuss controversial issues 20 percent or more of the time, with high levels of student participation and student-to-student dialogue) outperformed students in classes with less robust discussions, or that were strictly lecture-based, on a number of measures, including: they were more likely to intend to vote; they became more interested in politics as a result of their classroom experience; they followed the news more frequently; and they were more willing to listen to those with whom they disagreed. In the concluding chapter for this section of the book, Hess and McAvoy briefly discuss educational aims of the political classroom, including political equality, tolerance, autonomy, and political engagement. They draw upon deliberative democratic theory here, and throughout the book, to articulate their vision for the political classroom—a framing about which I will share some reservations in the latter part of this review.

Part II of the book presents three case studies of different classrooms: one in a suburban public school with a politically diverse student body; one in an urban public school with an overwhelmingly liberal student body; and one in a private religious school with a conservative study population. Each case study, made lively by quotes from students and teachers, and by the authors' field notes, brings to the fore the challenges teachers face as they aim to promote deliberations about controversial issues (e.g., how to ensure an inclusive environment; how to teach students to engage with opposing views when the student population is politically homogenous; how to cultivate students' autonomy within the boundaries of their religious framework). The descriptions of teachers' strategies—including legislative simulation, moot court trials, and devil's advocacy—coupled with teachers' rationales for their choices provide a rich account of how teachers respond to both local constraints and more universal challenges of leading a political classroom.

Part III of the book turns to three central questions about the professional judgment teachers must exercise within the political classroom: deciding what issues should be considered controversial (e.g., gay marriage, or climate change?); how to balance the tension between engaging students in deliberations about controversies and having an inclusive classroom environment; and finally, determining whether teachers should withhold their own views about controversies discussed in class. In these final chapters of the book Hess and McAvoy are more prescriptive. They argue that teachers are unjustified in teaching controversial issues with the aim of steering students toward their personal beliefs. They also argue that for issues like climate change, where there is scientific consensus but nonetheless persistent political disagreement, teachers would be wrong to present the issue as empirically debatable. They write that it is "irresponsible for schools to present questions as empirically controversial when in fact they are not" (p. 165). Facts matter in classrooms, even if they have lost currency in politics.

Hess and McAvoy's account still leaves lots of room for teachers' discretion, and rightfully so. Here again they rely on deliberative democratic theory—a reliance in this context, and throughout the book, about which I want to raise a few reservations. Hess and McAvoy suggest that determinations about which issues should be treated as controversial, and which controversial issues to include in the curriculum, may be best resolved if teachers deliberate with each other. To be sure, deliberations among teachers can lead to decisions that are more sensitive to a school's local context, and can promote a school climate that reflects the democratic ideals

that Hess and McAvoy uphold for society. Moreover, a deliberative process for deciding these matters honors teachers' autonomy and professional judgment.

However, I do wish there were some discussion of how teachers' discretion, via deliberations, cannot be unbounded if we take seriously certain moral considerations. What if, for example, deliberations among teachers lead to curricular decisions that would marginalize certain students? This concern reflects a foundational tension within democratic theory about how to balance respect for democratic processes with concern for achieving just outcomes. Hess and McAvoy undoubtedly agree that there are constraints on what teachers may do in their classroom, and they are explicit about this in their opposition to teachers presenting climate change as an empirically unsettled issue. I wish they had been equally explicit about these constraints in conjunction with their discussion of deliberative ideals—which is to say, I wish they had said that despite the value of a deliberative process, teachers cannot collectively decide to present climate change as empirically contested to their students.

I want to raise another reservation about the authors' presentation of and reliance on deliberative democratic theory. This reservation stems from a doubt about the feasibility of realizing deliberative ideals in US high school classrooms today, and relatedly, the desirability of working toward these ideals given the *de facto* segregation of schools by race and class. Hess and McAvoy acknowledge this reality, and the challenge of teaching students to engage with opposing views in the absence of much ideological or racial diversity is a central theme in their case studies. But they do not seem to more deeply question the plausibility of deliberative goals despite recognizing how segregated classrooms today actually are. For example, they report that in one class they observed, the views of one of the only African American students in the class were blatantly dismissed by her peers in discussions about affirmative action (“We don’t want to hear your facts,” p. 104). After this startling quote, Hess and McAvoy briefly mention Lynn Sanders’ criticism of deliberative theory—a criticism grounded in the concern that deliberations are likely to entrench rather than mitigate the disadvantages women and minorities face in making their voices heard (Sanders, 1997). But Hess and McAvoy do not extensively discuss here, or elsewhere in the book, whether deliberative ideals are feasible in the face of *de facto* segregation.

Nor do they give enough consideration to the deeper challenge to deliberation as a civic educational goal that Meira Levinson has advanced. Levinson questions whether deliberative ideals are even desirable goals given the systemic background inequalities in which they would be pursued today. Levinson argues that to enable marginalized students to participate on equal footing in deliberations could require teaching them, in *de facto* segregated classrooms, “the language of power”—that is, how to speak with the vocabulary, grammar, reasons, and cultural referents that appeal to members of the majority group (Levinson, 2003, p. 36). The cost of this lesson in deliberative effectiveness, Levinson concludes, may be far too great. It may amount to teaching minority students that they are civic outsiders, which is anathema to the egalitarian, inclusive intentions of deliberative theory. Hess and McAvoy note Levinson’s worry about deliberation in classrooms in a more general way, but I think the force of her criticism deserves more consideration than they give it.

These reservations about deliberative democracy extend far beyond what happens in schools. They are concerns that are rooted in the pernicious problems of *de facto* segregation of neighbourhoods, the discrimination that plagues many workplaces, and income inequality—all of which work against common, deliberative forums in which diverse citizens can share their perspective on equal footing, in schools and elsewhere. But schools may still be, as they have long been, our best opportunity to mitigate these obstacles. While conditions are far from ideal for realizing deliberative goals in classrooms, there may be no better alternative and we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. And as Hess and McAvoy stress,

deliberative ideals can still do a lot of good: “[W]e do not believe that merely teaching young people to deliberate will transform society. ... Nevertheless, [deliberative values] can promote more productive classrooms, friendships, families, workplaces, and community organizations and can also shape how young people evaluate what is appropriate behaviour in the public sphere” (p. 9). These possible benefits of deliberation are significant, and Hess and McAvoy’s book is a major contribution to the health of our democracy for showing us, in concrete ways, how high school students can learn how to be more deliberative citizens.

## References

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**Anne Newman** is Research Director at the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society at Stanford University. Her research interests include democratic theory and education policy, research ethics, and ethics education. She is the author of *Realizing Educational Rights: Advancing School Reform through Courts and Communities* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).