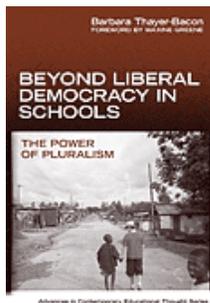


Professional Book Review

Thayer-Bacon, B. (2008). *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools: The Power of Pluralism*. New York: Teachers College Press. 199 pp., ISBN: 978-0807748657 (hc). \$44.00

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Demands for a rehabilitation of the U.S. educational system pervade academic research. However, few authors delve outside of the country for perspectives on what characteristics might best influence a new evolution or new goals of a re-envisioned educational system. Goaded by the idea that many students who do not succeed in the current U.S. system are from cultures with a focus on the collective, rather than the individual, Thayer-Bacon explores ingrained values of democracy in education and promotes areas for potential growth through comparisons with schools located in more collective cultures. The work focuses on themes discovered through Thayer-Bacon's "The C.A.R.E. Project" (Culturally aware, Anti-racist, Relationally focused, Educational communities). In each of the 17 schools she visited, she spent a week analyzing interactions among students, parents, and administrators. As a result of her time in each school, she realized how cultural dispositions affected the educational process and how the relationships between the two might influence the traditionally individual-centered schools working under the characteristics of liberal democracy. The book's goal is mighty: to encourage stakeholders to adjust the societal norms that influence education in the United States.

Before immediately immersing the reader in unfamiliar cultural or philosophical terrain, the author initially explores the background of liberal democracy in education. By re-investigating the familiar concepts of seminal theoretical philosophers such as John Dewey, Benjamin Barber, Iris Marion Young, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, Thayer-Bacon emphasizes the idea that none of the theorists has successfully probed beyond classical liberal democratic theory. Her investigation into how to create a democratic-society-always-in-the-making appears to be the next logical step.

The majority of the book concerns the comparison and contrast of schools in order to demonstrate themes found in collective systems. In Chapter Two, Thayer-Bacon compares and contrasts a Mexican school in central Mexico and a charter school in Texas containing over 80% Mexican American students to elaborate on the idea of shared responsibilities. This chapter comments on the differences between the schools' relationships with parents, the students' roles

within the schools, and the attitudes each method conveys toward parents and students. For Chapter Three, several teachers' stories are used to compare and contrast a school in Ghana and a school in the southern United States with a student body of 90% African American students. These stories, combined with Thayer-Bacon's observations, emphasize the concept of shared authority. Chapter Four explores the idea of shared identities through anecdotes from visits to a school on a Navajo reservation and an urban partnership high school in the Midwest for at-risk students. Thayer-Bacon explores nurturing communities through analyzing a Japanese Saturday School in East Tennessee and an elementary school in Japan. She explores paradoxes of collective cultures in Chapter Six by comparing a school with a majority of Chinese students in San Francisco and schools in Guangzhou, China. The work concludes with a reiteration of themes and a discussion of goals for the future of schools in the United States in regard to the work of Project C.A.R.E.

Works comparing and contrasting educational systems in different cultures often invite suspicion from local educators and administrators due to their romantic or naïve perceptions of the cultural influences on the educational sphere. One might, at first, fear that Thayer-Bacon has fallen into the same trap of idealism in regard to collective cultures. Instead, upon closer examination, numerous attempts toward objectivity are evident. The work is not anti-individualism, nor is it anti-American. Self-reflection permeates the work in an attempt to demonstrate elements of contextual importance, and the author notes that she is a philosopher of education, not an expert in the cultures she visits. No culture is held up as the perfect example, nor is any school or action vilified. Thayer-Bacon openly admits how her own educational background and indoctrination into liberal democracy may create biases concerning other cultural methods, particularly in regard to discipline methods that do not conform to her prior experiences and the fear of social determinism as a result of collective cultures. She notes this in the professional manner of a researcher documenting areas in which she will need to ensure validation and remove bias. Recognition of the author's humanity, rather than a false persona of absolute objectivity, pervades the book and influences the reception of the research for readers.

Many educators find recent scholarship so pedantic or so theoretical that connecting the research to practical application becomes impossible. In *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools: The Power of Pluralism*, Thayer-Bacon adeptly attempts to connect to stakeholders through a combination of strategies. The anecdotal evidence in the form of personal stories and experiences in each of the sample schools she visited creates a sense of intimacy through verisimilitudinous details. In addition, the constant return to theories in the section titled "Connecting Theory with Practice" reminds the reader that the work is no mere educational travelogue. Instead, the personal experiences, in constant connection with educational theories, serve to focus the point of the work: the need for a transactional democratic theory comprised of shared responsibility, shared authority, and shared identity. The format of the work is so engaging that even educators forced to contend with constant standardized assessment

research on a daily basis may find relevance in some aspect of the work. Through her concept-specific examination of schools in the United States as well as other countries, Thayer-Bacon reminds the reader about the importance of environments that foster teaching, not just test scores. In the current atmosphere of “Adequate Yearly Progress” required by the No Child Left Behind legislature, research emphasizing the fact that teachers need not shoulder the entire burden of child-rearing and child-success but may work in tandem with communities, families, and other professionals is a relief to read.

Some readers might find Thayer-Bacon’s introduction and chapter conclusions echoing dissertational constructs unnecessarily repetitive or self-referential. However, this slim volume contains layers of concepts to fuel discussion about cultural awareness, multiple meanings of democracy in education, and the philosophical roots of education in the United States. As a catalyst to conversation, her succinct conclusions are excellent reminders of key points beyond anecdotal evidence and theory. The work’s focus is not to provide a handbook on how to make ideological change at the basic level, although some possibilities are suggested. Instead, the book adroitly exposes readers to the idea that such a change is necessary and potentially beneficial.