



How common is the common good? Moving beyond idealistic notions of deliberative democracy in education



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Reviews developments of deliberative democratic theory from a political science perspective.
- Makes comparisons to contemporary approaches to civic education.
- Offers suggestion to revisit civic education in practice based on recent scholarly contributions.

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ABSTRACT

Assumptions based on deliberative democratic theory have dominated scholarship of democratic citizenship within political science and educational research. However, both fields have produced scholarship that raises questions regarding the efficacy of the deliberative model of democratic education. This article presents a critical synthesis that highlights the major trends of deliberative democratic theory from the field of political science, while making connections to education specific literature. The shift, away from idealistic notions toward a model of deliberative democracy that considers identity, group interests, and power differences within society, supports similar efforts to revisit democratic theory within civic education. The article concludes with recommendations for a revised, more realistic, conceptualization of civic education.

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Contents

1. Deliberative democracy, the common good, and their critics	13
1.1. First-Generation deliberative democracy	13
1.2. Relaxing consensus and the common good: second-generation deliberative democracy	15
1.3. Third generation: a systemic approach to deliberative democracy and its defects	16
2. Rethinking education for democracy	17
2.1. The role of power in society, schools, and classrooms should be considered essential to democratic education	17
2.2. Students' political experiences and the communities they inhabit should provide the foundation for democratic education	18
2.3. Education reform should challenge instrumental deficit oriented notions of civic education	19
2.4. Future research, theory, and practical recommendations to improve democratic education should focus on both individual and group identities	19
2.5. Future scholarship should promote an increase in interdisciplinary scholarship and research	20
3. Conclusion	20
References	20

Research, scholarship, and practice relating to democratic education have long incorporated notions of the deliberative democracy and the common good (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Gutmann,

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1987; Robertson, 2008). The political theory of deliberative democracy posits that citizens should deliberate about controversial and complex issues to develop a mutually beneficial shared vision moving forward (Michelbach, 2015). Many education scholars and teacher educators position schools and classrooms to serve as models of deliberative democratic education where students engage in inquiry and controversial issue discussion to identify a common good (Flynn, 2009; Hahn, 1998; Hess & Avery, 2008; Hess & Parker, 2001; Hess, 2009; Levy, 2011, 2013; Parker, 2003, 2010). In contrast, emerging scholarship consistently demonstrates limitations of the deliberative model of democracy within the classroom (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009; Camicia, 2016; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Levinson, 2012; Schmidt, 2013; Schutz, 2008). Indeed, work from education and political science scholarship challenges the assumptions related to deliberative democratic theory and implications toward education (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Apple, 2008; Mutz, 2008). For example, political scientists Mansbridge et al. (2012) drew attention to “defects” of democracy that can prevent effective deliberation. Similarly, civic education scholars, Castro and Knowles (2017) posited that common *idealized civic practices* could implement a culturally biased notion of deliberation that ostracizes marginalized communities.

While the fields have come to related conclusions, the findings often fail to reach an interdisciplinary audience. Indeed, Levine (2007) noted that civic education is a discipline without a field with contributions coming from political science, psychology, sociology, educational policy, and social studies education. In addition to interdisciplinary scholarship, theories and research *within* fields often speak with different voices and have complementary and contradictory perspectives. Therefore, we contend that scholarship in other disciplines can and should be used to strengthen within-field thought and practice. In this article, we bring attention to central arguments, and possible consequences, relating to deliberative democracy theory largely developed within the field of political science and make connections to educational research and scholarship. Particularly, we note that education scholars and political scientists have levied related critiques of deliberative democracy. However, the divided nature of social science, civic education, and political science scholarship often limits the effective dissemination of these ideas across disciplines. As a result, common educational practice still largely relies on models of deliberation that favor idealism at the expense of attention to inclusion, identity, and practicality.

This critical synthesis demonstrates the limitations of the deliberative model of democracy commonly enacted and advocated for in teacher education, schools, and policy initiatives. Combining the literature from two fields creates a compelling case for the argument that the model of education built on deliberative theory has proven ineffective at preparing citizens to address important social, economic, and political issues of the current era. Instead, those interested in education for democracy should consider the theoretical and empirical findings, and related assertions, within this review when developing teacher education, classroom curricula, and policy capable of addressing inequitable distributions of power, wealth, and opportunity within modern societies.

This synthesis begins by reviewing scholarship on deliberative democracy within the field of political science and relating it to conceptualizations of citizenship and democracy within education. Particularly, we employ Elstub's (2010) conceptualization of first, second, and third generation deliberative democracy as we review the evolution of deliberative theory in both fields. Based on Mansbridge and colleagues' (2012) defects of deliberative democracy, we identify important limitations to the dominant model of civic education. Through this review, we make five assertions for future conceptualizations of democratic education that include:

considering the role of power in society, schools, and classrooms; positioning students' political experiences; challenging instrumental notions of democratic education, incorporating group identities; and increasing interdisciplinary scholarship and research. In each case, we connect our recommendations to relevant research in fields outside of education, mainly political science, as well as to emerging discourses in democratic education. Finally, we provide suggestions for future research and theory to revisit the dominant models of education for democracy.

1. Deliberative democracy, the common good, and their critics

Before we can discuss democracy and education, we must acknowledge the differences in vocabulary and vernacular that exist across disciplines. Indeed, political scientists use terms such as deliberative democracy, democratic humanism, or political socialization, while education scholars are more apt to use terms such as civic/citizenship/democratic education or civic engagement in youth to frame their work. Creating additional complexity, the words can have different meaning among scholars working within the same disciplines (Haste, 2010; Pzeworski, 2010). For this work, we use *deliberative democracy* as an umbrella term to frame the reviewed scholarship from a political science or social theory perspective. While the connotations of the term shifts across the three generations reviewed below, in general we use Michelbach's (2015) definition of deliberative democracy as a system based on participation, rational discourse, and a politics centered on a strong conception of the public good. This exists as a critical response to the liberal conception of democracy that focuses on a vote-seeking or an interest-based model. In addition, we use *democratic education* to consider how these ideas manifest in education scholarship and practices designed to empower citizens to promote a more democratic society. In recent decades, discussions of deliberative democracy have occupied a prominent place in theory and research on democracy within the field of political science. As a result, the theory and practical suggestions relating to deliberative democracy have and will continue to develop.

While the term deliberative democracy was coined relatively recently by Joseph Bessette (1980), conversations about the underlying concept have been ongoing for some time. For example, Bohman (1998) stated, “the idea can be traced to Dewey and Arendt and then further back to Rousseau and even Aristotle” (p. 401). Early work describing deliberative democracy largely relied on the contributions of Habermas (1995, 1996) and Rawls (1993), who were heavily influenced by Kant's (1757/1795) conceptualization of the “Transcendental formula”, by stating that all individuals are guided by universal reason, which when employed through deliberations can bridge differences and promote common interests. Thus, classic theories of democracy formed the foundation of deliberative democracy, but have since been further developed and refined. Elstub (2010) provided context to these developments by outlining shifts along three generations of deliberative democracy.

1.1. First-Generation deliberative democracy

Within education scholarship, theoretical foundations for democratic education pull from many of the same sources as deliberative democracy, particular the first generation of scholarship. Much of the first generation work stems from John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas. Rawls (1993) purported that citizens' deliberations on public issues creates consensus through a “veil of ignorance” about their particular circumstances. In other words, citizens enter a deliberation conscious of the common good and ignore their personal potential for gain or loss. In theory, such a

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