

# Democratization through Education: A Social Justice Approach

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### Abstract

During seemingly tumultuous times for democracy, we look towards education and educators to reiterate the essential principles of preserving democratic ideals. When divisive media, “fake news,” and propaganda have encroached upon rational dialogue, it becomes the responsibility of educators to teach students to utilize critical literacy skills to evaluate the information with which they are bombarded. The authors of this article present a framework of maintaining democratic processes by systematically analyzing the fundamental concepts and principles of democracy, the principles of social justice, the major branches of philosophy, the essential elements of schooling, and critical literacy skills.

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In this time in which we find ourselves, it is important to revisit the basic fundamentals of our democratic society, and then to ask ourselves, what are we doing about preserving these rights and responsibilities? As Freire (1998) concisely acknowledged, “I cannot be a teacher if I do not perceive with ever greater clarity that my practice demands of me a definition about where I stand” (p. 93). Since the personal and professional lives of teachers are inextricably intertwined, it is not enough for each of us to follow these principles ourselves; we must also educate others, especially our youth. There are certain principles that we need to follow, not only by ourselves, but also taught by others.

It is through a social justice approach to the educative process that we prevent slippage of these principles in the face of those who would attempt to erode them. As Hytten (2015) explained, “Educators who foreground social justice in their work argue that the central purpose of schooling is to create the habits necessary to make deep democracy a reality. This means empowering students to understand the world around them, to identify problems and their root causes, to cultivate imagination, and to collaborate with others in transforming societies so that all people can live full and rich lives” (p. 3). At the heart of a social justice approach to the educative process is literacy (Greene, 2008), as the vehicle in which we can explore and reach others to explore a deep democracy. Neither teaching, nor literacy, nor literacy teaching/learning is neutral (Comber & Cormack, 1997; Freire, 1986; Giroux, 1987; Ladson-Billings, 1994, McLaren, 1988); all are influenced by context and culture, and all are woven together to strengthen the foundations and purpose of education. It is through literacy education using a social justice approach that we preserve the precious gift of democracy that our forefathers created for us.

This paper will discuss these issues through the following lenses: (a) the fundamental concepts and principles of democracy, (b) principles of social justice, (c) the major branches of philosophy, (d) the essential elements of schooling, and (e) critical literacy skills. By following this framework, the paper will lay out a systematic analysis of processes needed to keep our democratic practices strong and vital.

The Center for Civic Education ([www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)) concisely delineates three fundamental concepts and principles of democracy, as follows:

DEMOCRACY is rule by the people through free and fair elections and other forms of participation where the people (Demos) are the ultimate authority and the source of the authority of government, where the political equality of all citizens is an essential principle, and where free elections and civic participation are essential as well as a practical means of asserting our sovereignty. Elections must be free (all adult citizens can vote, stand for office, and have access to addressing the electorate), fair (voters must not be stopped from voting; all votes must be accurately counted), and frequent (held often enough to enable the People to exercise their control of government).

CONSTITUTIONALISM is the use of constitutions to limit government by law whereby constitutions are the means used to state what powers government shall have. By defining these powers, constitutions limit them, so that governments may exercise only the powers defined in the constitution. Also, constitutional government is limited, both in what it does and how it acts by acting within the law, and applicable to everyone. No one is above the law. An essential means of limiting government is establishing the rule of law, which is the primary element

of constitutionalism. Additionally, judicial review provides for courts to declare laws passed by the legislatures as null and void if they contradict the constitution. The rule of law begins and ends with adherence to the constitution.

LIBERALISM is freedom, equality, and dignity of the individual, which includes the following freedoms: freedom of religion/conscience, political freedom, freedom of the press, the right to privacy, and the right to freedom of association. Freedom of religion/conscience entails the right to practice any religion or none. Political freedom is the equal right of all citizens to participate in choosing those who govern and to remove them at will through elections. Freedom of the press includes electronic and social media. Freedom of individual expression, is not limited to oral, written, and symbolic communication. The right to privacy and to a private sphere of life free from governmental interference and freedom of association in public and private are also essential to a sense of autonomy and dignity of the individual.

In these principles, the concepts of social justice become clear. Rawls (1971) and Walzer (1995) discuss several important social justice concepts which are embedded in democratic practices. They are principles of justice and citizens' basic rights, as well as complex equality, agencies of inclusion, and welfare versus mutuality. Rawls considered two principles of justice. First, every person has *basic rights and liberties*. These are citizenship, freedom of speech, right to own property, right to assemble, liberty of conscience (speaking one's own mind), and freedom of thought. For example, voicing one's own opinion without being arrested, running for a political position, voting, right to trial by jury with innocence assumed unless proven guilty,

and being secure in one's own home are considered basic rights. Every person is entitled to these basic rights. Second, social and economic rights are balanced out so that everyone has access to these *social and economic benefits*. Social benefits refers to positions of power - government, business, social status, economic class, and others—which are accessible to all. For example, public schools, parks, and playgrounds are accessible to all, and thereby constitute social rights. Economic rights include tax-funded programs, public schools, public works, museums, institutions and infrastructure in order to provide economic rights and justice for all. Basic rights must come first before any social and economic benefits can be accessed. Without the benefits of basic rights and liberties, a person's access to social and economic benefits would be distorted and diminished.

Similarly, in the classroom, *basic rights* are enacted when all students' cultures are respected and represented in the classroom through the curriculum, teaching methods, classroom and behavior management. Additional examples of basic rights in the classroom include students being allowed to make decisions and choices, as well as to determine rule of law in terms of being included in developing rules for managing the classroom. *Social and economic rights* are enacted when students are treated equitably without favoritism and when class meetings are held with an active open exchange of ideas. All students are given equal opportunity to participate in classroom activities, for example, when the teacher rotates "jobs" to all students.

Walzer (1995) delineated social justice into areas of complex equality, agencies of inclusion, and welfare versus mutuality. Within complex equality, everyone in the world has something to offer. Everyone's talents are not the same. Therefore, when everyone's talents are put in one big bucket, there will be a complex whole - all skills and talents represented and

contributing - and they will all equal out. It is not okay to “justifiably exclude” people just because they are not believed to have any redeeming qualities worth sharing and contributing to society. For example, jobs are differentiated to extend complex equality to the underemployed and internally excluded. In classrooms, the teacher would strive to create a classroom climate of complex equality and to look for the talents in all students. Also, teachers would find a way for all students to contribute to the activities in the classroom in a way that their contributions are celebrated and valued.

Within agencies of inclusion, a voluntary association in a civil society provides recognition, empowerment, training, and even employment. This concept adds to the diversity of the society and decentralizes the insider/outsider spheres of society. An agency of inclusion is any group that is inclusive, open to anyone who may want services from the group, or to join the group. For example, the Salvation Army does not exclude anyone who walks through their doors. Public schools (but not private schools!) take all students. Boys and Girls Clubs include all children. Social movements, such as #metoo, Black Lives Matter, March for Science, or the Women’s March are agencies of inclusion. In classrooms, teachers develop classroom organizational patterns in which students work together to develop inclusivity, support, and recognition for each other’s efforts. For example, cooperative groupings create agencies of inclusion. The United States, on a macro level, has already enacted desegregation in public schools, accessibility for all Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and inclusive public school education with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

In differentiating welfare versus mutuality, welfare is essentially a “hand-out,” without any necessary response or responsibility. Mutuality is a “hand-up” where those who have inherited their exclusion or who are internally excluded, or who may be considered justifiably

excluded, can participate to improve their situation and give back to the community and society. For example, Habitat for Humanity is an example of mutuality in which the future homeowner participates in building his or her home with the assistance of volunteer labor and supplies, whereas Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is an example of “welfare” based upon income for housing assistance. In higher education environments, Pell Grants are an example of “welfare,” whereas work study programs are an example of mutuality. In classrooms, the “hand up” concept occurs in the form of differentiated instruction, Response to Intervention (RTI), and opportunities for students to utilize their unique skills to teach or inform others.

While it is noted that Rawls and Walzer conceptualized issues of social justice in the 1970’s and 1990’s, these concepts are extremely potent in today’s contexts, and therefore, need to be re-examined in light of what is happening across the world. Is education then, in its current form, delivering democratic practices and social justice processes? If these are the principles, then critical literacy can be the pathway to delivering, exploring, and applying these principles. If education is to be the vehicle through which a country develops and strengthens its democratic customs, practices, norms and laws, then what are the questions we need to be asking ourselves, especially those of us who perform educative functions in our respective societies?

- Are we currently delivering the inherent values, processes, concepts and characteristics of democracy to our youth?
- What do we do in our classrooms to strategically advance democracy? What processes do we use in the teaching-learning process? What values do we instill? What concepts do we develop?

- What do we do in our classrooms to epistemologically advance democracy? What studies do we have students undertake that would advance their decision-making and critical thinking skills?
- What do we do in our classrooms to morally advance democracy?
- What literacy strategies do we employ to ensure that all students can access these explorations of the democratic process?

We can begin to frame answers to these questions through a philosophical delineation of the social justice approach.

Table 1

*Philosophical Approaches to Social Justice*

Philosophical Orientation	Nature of Reality (metaphysical)	Nature of Knowledge (epistemological)	Nature of Values (axiological)
Democracy	<p>Democracy is a process. Therefore, it is subject to constant change, as the People participate in the governing of the State.</p> <p>In order to participate effectively in a democracy, one has to <b>know</b> “demos.” To know, in this case, is to live the experience of demos.</p> <p>In our increasingly diverse society, “demos” becomes increasingly messy.</p>	<p>Democracy is NOT viewed as having universal truths and absolutes. Rather, it is viewed as an ever evolving and changing set of truths as new experiences arise to challenge the current ones. Therefore, tentative truths serve until new tentative truths evolve.</p> <p>New knowledge is derived as the People participate in their own governing.</p> <p>Internal and external factors play a role in</p>	<p>Just as knowledge and truth evolve, so do democratic values, in order to accommodate new knowledge and truths.</p> <p>Ethical conduct and moral codes are determined by what works within the realm of political equality.</p> <p>Freedoms, as spelled out in the constitution and its amendments, accommodate these ever evolving values, which in</p>

	<p>What the People must not do is to shut their minds to this spectrum of valuing perspectives, and work toward solutions for all People to be part of this democracy.</p>	<p>slackening current tentative truths, which in turn brings to our attention new tentative truths.</p> <p>Subjectivity transforms objectivity.</p> <p>Democracy is grounded in context.</p>	<p>turn, provide political freedoms for all to participate in the governing of the society.</p>
Constitutionalism	<p>Constitution (to constitute) is also a verb, a process. It is seen as ever-evolving intentionality and consciousness that constitutes subject to change/amendments as new truths, knowledge, norms arise. As contradictions to democratic norms arise.</p> <p>The constitution sets forth the rights and responsibilities of citizens to function within the framework of democratic processes.</p>	<p>Norms* evolve to reshape customs, folkways, and mores; converting into laws in some cases.</p> <p>In cases where customs, folkways and mores are subverted to serve authoritarian purposes, new democratic forms need to be derived to challenge these subversions which constitute the intentionality and consciousness of democratic norms.</p>	<p>As societal values change, so do the norms (customs, folkways, mores).</p> <p>As new tentative truths and their inherent values arise, constitutionality evolves to reshape and define customs, folkways, and mores that have been subverted for authoritarian purposes.</p>
Liberalism	<p>Liberalism is a process. It is subject to constant change. By its very nature, liberalism asks for constant change to square the freedoms, equality, and dignity of each individual.</p>	<p>As the population changes, so do the truths and knowledge, which in turn drive reexamination of our values.</p> <p>In cases where customs, folkways and mores are</p>	<p>As a more inclusive and interwoven society evolves, so do the values; reconsidered and transformed.</p> <p>Freedoms, as spelled out in liberalism, accommodate the</p>

	Part of liberalism is to be liberated as an individual and a society, meaning the freedoms expressed in the U.S. Constitution.	subverted to serve authoritarian purposes, internal and external factors challenge the representation of truths.	ever changing values, which in turn, create agents of change.
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**\*Norms** are the agreed-upon expectations and rules by which a culture guides the behavior of its members in any given situation. Of course, norms vary widely across cultural groups. **Folkways**, sometimes known as “conventions” or “customs,” are standards of behavior that are socially approved but not morally significant. **Mores** are norms of morality. Certain behaviors are considered **taboo**, meaning a culture absolutely forbids them, like incest in U.S. culture. Finally, **laws** are a formal body of rules enacted by the state and backed by the power of the state. Virtually all taboos, like child abuse, are enacted into law, although not all mores are.

Understanding a social justice approach to democracy, constitutionalism, and liberalism through these philosophical paradigms allows for the exploration of new ideas to achieve the three principles of democracy. Schools and education are the only institutionalized means in which we can attempt to level the playing field and ensure equity in the democratic processes. From here, we need to drill down to the unique aspects of schooling/education to identify and lay out specific ways teachers and schools can see that democracy, constitutionalism, and liberalism continue to be advanced and strengthened. We need to further ask the following: What are the people’s interests, rights, and opinions that are to be taken into account in a democratic society? What processes are necessary to develop people’s ways of knowing and understanding democracy? What are the values that are necessary in order to preserve a democratic society? How can we prevent our norms (unwritten rules of society) from slipping away, for example, lying becoming a norm? What processes must we employ to advance learning about democracy?

We can begin to frame answers to these questions by embedding the fundamental concepts and principles of democracy into the essential elements of the educational processes, such as the purpose of schooling, role of learners, curriculum, instructional methods, classroom management, assessment, and role of the teacher. The purpose of schooling is to model a

democratic and diverse society, the “rule of law,” and multiple diverse societal values. The role of the learner is to be proactive and interactive; to seek answers, dialogue, evolving and changing truths; to be experiential and transformative; and to be referential and critical. The learner is to be engaged as both learner and teacher. The curriculum will be experience-centered, provide choice, and give opportunities to experience demos, values conflicts, values resolution and transformation. The curriculum will develop norms and laws in reference to constitutional provisions and the intentionality and consciousness of contemporary truths. Instructional methods will include critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, collaborative learning, dialogue and collegial debate, and choice. They will also will be inquiry-based, take a constructivist approach, involve transformative thinking and critical pedagogy, and reference intentionality and consciousness of contemporary truths. Classroom management will be democratic, participatory, self-regulated, engaging, and self-directed. Assessment will include ongoing feedback, self-assessment, and reflection, and will inform instruction. The role of the teacher is to be a facilitator, a guide for the curriculum, instructional methods, and classroom management.

The next level to be explored and examined is literacy processes. What literacy processes are necessary to promote democratic principles and actions? Seely-Flint, Kitson, Lowe, and Shaw (2014) provide some insight for a way to begin examining this issue. They developed the following principles:

- Literacy practices are social and culturally construed
- Literacy practices include ‘everyday’ texts and multi-modal texts
- Literacy practices are purposeful
- Literacy practices invite different funds of knowledge

- Literacy practices are learned through inquiry
- Literacy practices contain ideologies and values

We can begin to frame these principles by delineating social justice and literacy practices.

This is where the intricacies of difference matter in terms of how democracy is perceived in the classroom, as well as in society. Each of the literacy theorists embrace the idea that literacy practices are socially and culturally construed, but to what end? While democracy provides for meaning to take place between text and learner, and constitutionalism provides for close reading, it is not until liberalism invites empowerment that the literate move toward transformation of society. This same trend is evident in literacy practices, including the use of everyday texts and multimodal texts, the purpose of literacy, inviting different funds of knowledge, learning through inquiry, and literacy containing ideologies and values. Without the relative historical contexts, it is more difficult to achieve transformational literacy. In a democratic society, it is not enough to read. Constitutionalism provides for application of literacy practices to social justice. Liberalism, however, demands action and transformation within literacy practices.

Table 2

*Framework of Social Justice and Literacy Practices*

Literacy Principle	Democracy	Constitutionalism	Liberalism
Social and cultural construction	Meaning takes place between text and learner <i>Transactional Theory</i> (Rosenblatt, 1978, 2005)	Textual evidence <i>Close Reading</i> (Richards, 1924; Paul & Elder, 2004)	Literacy to empower <i>Critical Literacy</i> (Freire, 1986, 1998; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993)
Everyday texts and multi-modal texts	Online and print media Social networking Open Educational Resources (OER)	The U.S. Constitution Online and print media Judicial decisions and interpretations Laws	Text and vocabulary that empowers Texts that embody social injustices, discrimination, and inequality

Purpose of literacy	Literacy practices serve the purpose of promoting participatory citizenship, such as being an informed voter and embracing the comprehension skills necessary to be active community participant.	Literacy practices serve the purpose of comprehending social, civil, legislative, and judiciary documents to inform intentionality and consciousness of contemporary truths.	Literacy practices serve the purpose of empowerment and teaching code switching and using language to suit specific purposes, i.e, informal language to text or tweet versus formal language to write for academic and workplace purposes.
Invitation to different funds of knowledge	Literary works reflect various primary and secondary sources.	Literary works reflect evolving, contemporary legislative and judicial documents.	Literary works reflect various historical, cultural, gendered, and socio-economic perspectives.
Learning through inquiry	Reading of materials promotes comprehension skills, such as critical thinking, reflection, synthesis, interpretation, analysis, identifying key concepts and major propositions, and evaluation.	Reading of materials promotes comprehension skills, such as utilizing textual evidence to support conclusions, engaging in critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, identifying key concepts and major propositions, and evaluation.	Reading of materials promotes comprehension skills that empower and explore diverse viewpoints in order to engage in critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, identifying key concepts and major major propositions, and evaluation.
Practices contain ideologies and values	Literacy practices value constructs of power as well as participating in those constructs of power. Ideologically, the democracy represents the peoples' participation in it through judicial, legislative, and executive literacy-based actions.	Literacy practices value evolving constructs of power that are influenced by the people. Ideologically, the Constitution should reflect the intentionality and consciousness of contemporary truths.	Literacy practices value multilingualism, contextual perspectives, and voice to empower the people. Ideologically, the people utilize literacy practices to foment transformation at individual, community, national, and global levels.

Relative historical perspective is powerful when considering that literacy is learned through inquiry. For example, when Dewey (1916) wrote *Democracy and Education*, the levels of critical thinking were appropriate for the time. Since then, those same levels have become more sophisticated. Events that did not occur within an individual's lived experience can only be learned and interpreted through practicing literacy, as compared to those who have lived the experiences firsthand. Perhaps, for those who live the experience, literacy enhances their firsthand knowledge.

Furthermore, basic literacy skills must be thoroughly taught in order for democracy to be a robust process. What we are aiming for are highly proficient readers who have internalized strategic reading skills. According to Unrau, (2004), these are readers who activate and connect with the knowledge base related to the subject of reading, and monitor their comprehension process while reading and recognize moments of mental blackouts and misunderstanding that lead to confusion. Proficient readers pay attention to the spectrum of information they are reading and categorize it from important to unimportant, giving priority to major content and secondary attention to trivia, make inferences - hypotheses, interpretations, predictions, conclusions - and test them while reading, and periodically review and summarize what they have read and ask themselves questions about the readings. Further, Unrau described proficient readers as those who do not ignore comprehension breakdowns or lapses, but take steps to correct comprehension once problems are recognized; who clarify for themselves why they are reading and try to understand what is expected of them as readers and learners; and who make sure that the meanings they are constructing while reading are internally consistent and compatible with what they know and what makes sense. Proficient readers must be able to identify key concepts or major propositions when reading expository texts and use them as

knowledge organizers. Additionally, Unrau characterized proficient readers as those who make good use of their working memory so they can hold alternative interpretations of a text in mind, compare them, and evaluate them to determine which interpretation should be granted greater credibility.

In the absence of these literacy skills, democracy is lost. Because of the times in which we find ourselves and our students, it is essential that we impart these literacy principles and specific literacy skills to ensure that our students are able to strategically advance democracy and teachers, epistemologically, are able to raise students' levels to the degree that they have advanced decision-making and critical thinking skills, and the values that are necessary to preserve our democratic society are maintained. Through this exploration of democracy and social justice paradigms, it becomes clear that literacy is the pathway to preserving the rights and responsibilities in a democratic society. In this way, we, too, may become teachers who stand up for "what is right against what is indecent, who [are] in favor of freedom against authoritarianism, who [are] supporter[s] of authority against freedom with no limits, and who [are] defender[s] of democracy against the dictatorship of right or left... [and who are teachers] full of the spirit of hope, in spite of all signs to the contrary" (Freire, 1986, p. 94).

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