



## A 'social cartology': education as a mechanism for social change

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## Book and media reviews

# A ‘social cartology’: education as a mechanism for social change

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Douglas Bourn renews the focus on the relationship between education, democracy, and social change in this book, which includes chapters addressing the practice and role of educators. He brings together educational theories and practices in presenting the ways in which the classroom can be an authentically democratic space and discusses how education has the potential to drive society towards the common goal of a just and sustainable world. The book presents all the major theorists, from Dewey to Apple, who have contributed to this discussion for over a hundred years. As a researcher exploring children’s and young people’s civic learning, this focus on theory was welcome, while the section on the role of educators, youth workers and young people as agents of social change provided interesting comparisons with my own research. The book covers youth charities and activism as well as education, which makes it an engaging read for youth practitioners, youth campaigners, and the wider civil society and philanthropic networks that support them.

The book has twelve chapters. The first six are dedicated to pedagogy and theory, while the second half presents examples and discussions on the potential of practitioners, including teachers and youth workers, as well as young people themselves, to act as agents for change.

Taking different concepts—such as democratic society, liberation, socialism and global social justice—to frame the theoretical chapters, the author successfully manages to cover the significant ideas of some of the greatest education thinkers of the past hundred years. The book makes the ideas and pedagogies of John Dewey, R.H. Tawney, Pablo Freire, Henry Giroux and Antonia Darder accessible and relevant to contemporary research into the purposes of education. In this debate Biesta has recently argued that we must explore the constraints of the modern system and examine the need for education to allow students to explore their sense of self, as well as being equipped with skills and made ready for employment. Biesta argues how we must regain democratic education in order to ‘regain the democratic heart of education’ (2020, p. 32).

Chapter 1 contextualises the book and states its purpose: to address the shifts and changes in the position of education in a society characterized by change. The author argues that it is as important as ever that education remain a place of critical exploration. In chapters 2 – 6 readers meet a number of key thinkers who have engaged with pedagogy and its potential to challenge and transform. The second half of the book applies modern frameworks to exemplify the approaches to education, focusing not only on actors and their potential to drive change, but also by examining large global institutions such as UNESCO. This part of the book also discusses how engaging with sustainable development goals can enable educators to contextualize their practice. There is a particular focus on the dramatic challenge of climate change and how education can lead the way in affecting social change. The straightforward format of the book is both unexpectedly hopeful in a world of more sober educational research, as well as being vastly informative for practitioners. The book manages to present complex pedagogies in ways that clearly address the role of schools, educators and civil society organisations working with children and young people. It provides a positive outline for practitioners of how they can embed democratic learning in the classroom, with helpful personal examples offered from the author’s own experiences.

One key strength of the book is the recognition of youth activism and its place within a global context. The chapter explores research approaches but rightly identifies a lack of depth and criticality in the research on participation, including that which examines the role of social media in young people’s civic action. As a researcher of children’s and young people’s action, I was interested in the difference between more formal and informal mechanisms in youth participation. The chapter shows that while formalised channels, including young people’s training around agency and voice, do have an impact, young people ‘have developed their own approaches to learning and forms of social action’ (Bourn, 2021, p. 162). Current research has shown how young people are engaging in civic and social action and the ways they are increasingly moving away from formal avenues and focusing on cause-related youth action (Lau & Body, 2021). This is something that is captured here when Bourn shows an

understanding of the causes ‘close to home’ that young people support. Bourn takes a critical look at the theories and practices of youth participation and identifies how these can lack meaningful and impactful engagement and can feel tokenistic to young people. Through examples the chapter explores how engagement is transformed into social action and authentic youth leadership. Reviewing organisations that move from engaging young people to youth social action, this chapter cites the important work of the Citizenship Foundation and #iwill campaign, among others. For organisations and schools aiming to make this shift, the examples in this chapter present important ways of supporting young people while allowing them ownership of their social action.

Another strength of this book lies in the way it presents examples from a range of fields and adds to a growing focus on primary and secondary education, as well as recognising the learning that takes place outside of school. The value of chapters 9 and 10 lies in the way that greater partnership between organisations and schools and colleges often enables better and more authentic experiences for young people. Bourn encourages the application of models from youth development practice as important pedagogies for authentic youth engagement and social action, and examples from global youth work are presented as models for practice that could be used within the classroom. He focuses on how by applying these critical models, organisations can be changed, becoming far more democratic in their practice. The questions posed at the end of each of these chapters allow practitioners a reflective space to engage with the learning offered by the examples given and how they can be applied to their own practice. This could serve as a starting point for organisations seeking to engage in more democratic and youth-led practices.

The book could have benefited from a wider engagement with the constraints and barriers that can be faced within schools by educators and the lack of space within the curriculum. While so many have argued that democratic learning should be the foundation of curriculum design (Belas, 2019), research shows that current education policy actually limits authentic democratic learning (Apple, 2014). The design and prescriptiveness of the English school curriculum confines democratic education to RSE or PSHE (Belas, 2019; Ashbridge et al., 2022). Ashbridge et al. (2022) discuss the contradictions that play out within an education policy founded in a neoliberal state system, where democratic education goes off timetable, and there are limits to teacher agency and barriers to classroom learning and activities. It is important to engage with research that shows how the tensions of an overwhelming curriculum and the metrics of success within schools can be distractions to learning. In fact, instead of being the bedrock of education, engagement with civic learning is often understood as an add-on in a busy curriculum. While it is important to be hopeful and show evidence of positive examples, it is important to recognise the overall ideological climate and the way it erodes democratic learning spaces.

Overall, this book is an important bridge between both theory and practice, but also between the work of educators in schools and youth development organisations as well as young people themselves. The way in which the layout goes from theory to practice, the engaging examples, and the discussion and critique of theory ensure this can be used as a handbook for organisations looking to change the way they work, but it can also help them to apply different models and pedagogies to support children and young people's social action through education. The later chapters, focusing on educators and practitioners and the way they can become agents for change, is almost a call to action for those working with children and young people. It reminds us that democratic learning should remain at the heart of everything we do.

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