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Public Acts of Self-Deliberation: Preparation for Discursive Democracy in Education

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ABSTRACT: This conceptual essay forwards self-deliberation as an act to be included in the preparation of educators and administrators. Self-deliberation is defined as a public act of deliberation that can be instigated pedagogically to prepare students for difficult dialogues on enduring issues in education. Self-deliberation provides another pedagogical method for preparing aspiring educators to participate in deliberative or discursive democracy. Narrative vignettes are used to illustrate the acts of self-deliberation performed by aspiring teachers of color as they consider controversial issues such as affirmative action, racial segregation, and culturally relevant education.

Keywords: self-deliberation, discursive democracy, teacher preparation, leadership preparation
Aspiring teachers and administrators are expected to facilitate and participate in difficult dialogues, public deliberation, and decision-making that concerns the future of public education, yet there is little attention to how they are prepared to meet these expectations. Some researchers fear that schooling today is heading toward democratic bankruptcy: “the absence of democratic ideals in teaching and learning” (Waterson & Rud, 2009). The expectations for democratic participation coupled with concerns about the reduced attention to democratic ideals adds urgency to the question raised by Borman, Danzig, and Garcia (2012): How do people learn to act as citizens in a democracy? They point to democratic deliberation - open and rational debate in which citizens consider the ideas presented by others - as a fundamental characteristic of democratic participation (Borman, Danzig, & Garcia, 2012).

The question of preparing for public deliberation was central for me when, during collecting data for a study on the social justice orientations of aspiring teachers of color (from ethnic minority groups in the U.S.), I witnessed what I have come to name - public acts of self-deliberation. A public act of self-deliberation is defined as verbal communication in a public space (among another or others) that is provoked by a question or situation that causes the deliberator to consider multiple perspectives and scenarios. I had not anticipated the extended moments of deliberation that left me and the participants (Jay and Pang: pseudonyms) so unsettled. For several months after the interviews I harbored feelings of unease that left me wondering how to make sense of and portray these moments. I wondered if others in their courses or practicum sites (who tended to be White) would feel as pleasantly disturbed as I did were these participants to perform self-deliberation, and if such episodes would be allowed to reach their natural conclusion when controversial topics were discussed. Their narrative vignettes are illustrations of public acts of self-deliberation focused on topics such as affirmative action, culturally relevant education, and racial/ethnic segregation. Self-deliberation, as a public act, is forwarded as practice for participating in difficult dialogues across social difference and power asymmetries and as a precondition for deliberative or discursive democracy. Despite the sophistication of academic research on public deliberation, Lee (2011) calls for a deeper analysis of the reproduction of inequality, namely the causes and consequences of stratification in the practitioner corps and among participants. Before presenting their narrative vignettes I situate their acts of self-deliberation in the literature on deliberative or discursive democracy and its connection to education. Included are recommendations for developing the practice of self-deliberation in educational settings in order to promote self-deliberation as a pedagogically inspired act to prepare aspiring educators and administrators to facilitate and participate in difficult dialogues that can affect micro- and macro-level policy and practices.

**Literature Review**

The term deliberative democracy, also referred to as discursive democracy, was coined by Joseph Bessette (1979) (Mansbridge et al., 2006). As a form of rhetoric, deliberative democracy denotes “a joint activity of people talking about something that happened outside of their immediate setting; making practical decisions about what is to happen next; and then publicly reflecting on what just happened…” while also “…rationally weighing alternatives on the basis of earlier knowledge” (Varenne, 2007, p. 1569). Public deliberation is not inherently a democratic process; how it proceeds and who benefits is primarily determined by who is at the deliberation table and what rules of engagement are dictating the deliberative process. The following strands of literature contribute to an understanding of how one might be prepared to participate in public deliberation: prerequisites for deliberative democracy and their limitations,
student participation in deliberative democracy, and deliberation as an act to be provoked by curriculum and pedagogy.

Prerequisites for Deliberative Democracy and Their Limitations

Democratic theorists have identified prerequisites (or the ideal contexts) for deliberative democracy to unfold: freedom, reason, equality (J. Cohen, 1989), social justice (Elster, 1998; Fishkin, 1991; Fraser, 1992; 1997; Young, 2001) and the absence of power (Habermas, 1962, 1984/1991). Commonly advanced prerequisites are social equality among deliberators and rationality (Sanders 1997; Mansbridge et al., 2006). Further contributing to the conversation on the importance of social equality is Sanders’ (1997) inclusion of the politics of epistemology as a factor that circumscribes the possibility for deliberation. “Deliberation requires . . . equality in ‘epistemological authority,’ in the capacity to evoke acknowledgement of one’s argument” (Sanders, 1997, p. 349). Given that not all are able to equally able to evoke others to acknowledge their argument, he asks that we consider two problems: How “people who routinely speak less”, generally those “most alienated from conventional American politics may take part and be heard and how those who typically dominate might be made to attend to the views of others” (p. 352). The absence of social equality, including epistemological authority, poses a limitation for public deliberation - as does the prerequisite for rationality. In other words, “[a]rguing that democratic discussion should be rational, moderate, and not selfish implicitly excludes the public talk that is impassioned, extreme, and the product of particular interests”, and poses a problem for inclusion (Sanders, 1997, p. 370).

In order to address some of the limitations mentioned above, Fraser (1992) suggests that multiple publics convene so that participation and participants are reorganized or redistributed across publics or into mini-publics. Mini-publics are created when “small groups of people deliberate together” (i.e., deliberative polls, consensus conferences, citizens’ juries, and planning cells) (Goodin, 2008, p. 13). Another format for deliberation is the deliberative forum which, according to Gutmann (2003), is valuable “when their members search for significant points of convergence between different cultural perspectives” (p. 71). While various formats for deliberation can be useful for working toward change, Sanders wonders if there is a model of deliberation that would better address these limitations. He suggests that there are “occasions when democratic assemblies should do nothing like pursue the common good but instead should just listen and respond to particular complaints” (p. 362). However, the challenges of social stratification and inequality make if difficult to realize his recommendation (Lee, 2011). To listen with the intent to provide a response to complaints suggests that deciphering layers of meaning across social group differences is necessary. Consider a scenario such as the one described by researchers conducting a study of language used during public deliberations on school desegregation who found that citizens used coded rhetoric that was racist and group interested (Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000).

Student Participation in Discursive Democracy

Researchers have provided examples of high students’ deliberation on difficult subject matter such as racism and hate speech (Gorman, 2008), examined deliberation among K-12 educators (Stitzlein, 2010) and students in connection to social justice (Camicia, 2010; North, 2009) and technology (Wylie & Marri, 2010). Wylie and Marri (2010) examined democratic dialogue among high school students using a Web 2.0 technology (social networking
application) as a forum for what they call teledeliberative democratic discourse to respond to a perceived act of injustice committed by a school administrator. They suggest that technology can be used to facilitate dialogue and create communities of shared beliefs across differences related to religion, gender, race, and culture. Still, few scholars in education have addressed curriculum deliberation empirically in cross cultural settings (e.g., Misco, 2007) or more broadly as public deliberation in the context of schooling with attention to individuals’ life histories or positionalities (e.g., Jung, 1991; Murtadha & D’Ambrosio, 1997; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001).

Deliberative democracy asks that educators pay attention to “the ways discursive practices and strategies of social engagement differ across cultures, and the ways in which a focus on ‘privileged’ forms of discourse tends to silence those from cultures with less power” (Schutz, 2008, p. 434). Researchers have examined how different forms of discursive democracy have been used by students from different raced, classed, and gendered positions and how practices of discursive democracy are shaped by social differences such as race, class, and gender. Stall and Stoecker (1998) described the gendered dimensions of democratic practices, identifying democratic solidarity as the predominant practice in male-dominated contexts and discursive democracy based in female traditions of collective engagement.

Aaron Schutz (2008) traced the development of a vision of U.S. democracy around middle-class patterns of expression (discursive collaboration) that assumed those from the middle-class to be ideal agents of social change and education in contrast to working class people and their patterns of discourse (democratic solidarity): straight-talk. Using social-cultural theory, Schutz identified class-informed ways of being experienced by working-class students entering colleges: primarily (upper) middle-class institutions. Such studies point to the role of social-cultural difference in the appropriation of participatory practices by students and the institutions’ role in maintaining social systems of power and privilege. If participatory practice is informed by race and/or class then there is a need to examine how some forms and purposes of deliberation are valued and structured into academic settings and perpetuate the assumption that some groups (and not others) are suited for agency.

Public Deliberation in the Curriculum and Pedagogy of Education Preparation

Public deliberation, as noted by curriculum and democratic theorists, is an art of democratic practice (e.g., Schwab, 1983; Reid, 1978): a form of discursive democracy in education (e.g., Schutz, 2008; Varenne, 2007) and rhetoric (Neinkamp, 2001). According to curriculum theorist Joseph J. Schwab (1969, 1983) deliberation should be a central process in curriculum studies and teachers should be included in the deliberation on curriculum issues: “involved in debate, deliberation, and decision about what and how to teach” (p. 245). Furthermore, “teachers should also be able to model deliberation, especially when issues are abstract, controversial, or complex” (Waterson & Rud, 2009, p. 17).

Public school curriculum deliberation should involve procedures that guard against dominant perspectives crowding out non-dominant perspectives (Camicia, 2010). According to Sanders (1997), broadening participation in deliberation is more than a matter of redistributing the skills of argumentation; explicit attention to group dynamics and strategies are needed “to undercut the dominance of higher-status individuals”, for the “democratic hope” of deliberation is that it “produces mutual respect” (p. 367). The struggle for recognition (Fraser, 1997) is an area of conflict for students at all levels and educators must grapple with issues of concern to students who are contending with difficult and complex content. Educational preparation
programs can help to expose the limitations and obstacles to democratic deliberations on educational policy and provide practice in democratic discourse.

Narratives of Self-Deliberation

This notion of public self-deliberation draws on conceptions of internal rhetoric as an intrapersonal (first forwarded by philosopher Francis Bacon) and self-persuasive act involving mental or cognitive dissonance “necessary to enable ethical decisions and actions” (Neinkamp, 2001, p. 7). However, in contrast to internal rhetoric, self-deliberation is an outward expression of reflection that is more akin to voicing a stream of consciousness. The following narrative vignettes of self-deliberation were elicited with participants who were undergraduate students seeking a bachelor’s degree and teacher certification through a university-based program. The participants ranged from nineteen to 20 years of age during the interviews and identified as a people of color (African American, Hmong American). The interviews were guided by the topics of family history educational background, current educational experiences, identity, equity and social justice, and teaching expectations.

At the onset of the interviews I was interested in their beliefs about education, aspirations to meet students’ needs as teachers, and values related to complex issues such as racial/ethnic difference and justice. In the following excerpt, Jay self-deliberates on the topics of teacher demographics (racial minority teachers) and affirmative action. He responded to a prompt asking him to describe the high school he attended and the students he envisions teaching in the future.

Jay

Plus, the school I went to, it’s diverse. It’s a huge diversity population. I heard there’s only like two minority teachers there so I think it would be like easier if more minorities were placed in more diverse schools ‘cause some students just learn better or are more motivated if they see a teacher or educator who have like the same some of the same…what word I’m looking for…like some of the same characteristics as them that could be race, ethnic ughh, race - stuff like that. I had two teachers who were black, well minorities….They both were female. I don’t know why we had that connection but we just had this real positive connection when we first met each other. Even though she was only my teacher for that seventh grade year I was cool with her my eighth grade year too. The majority of them were female, white, but [there] was also a guy. He was black male in my junior year of high school. He wasn’t my teacher but we conversed a while. He was a cool guy. But it all doesn’t come down to race. To this day I still have a really good relationship with my kindergarten teacher…and she was white. I know it doesn’t always come down to race, but certain students feel like they can only go to people of the same race. You wouldn’t just like randomly go to this one teacher and just express all your sorrows to that one teacher, but some people do. They share their sorrows with anyone, but the majority of the people don’t.

Jay’s opinion on the contributions of teachers of color to student success wavered on the relevance and irrelevance of race and left the question unresolved. Public acts of self-deliberation concern individuals publicly attempting to make sense of issues as well as their own relationship to issues through a deliberative process rather than trying to persuade or devise a
solution. In the following vignette, Jay self-deliberates on the topic of affirmative action and illustrates his shifting perspective as he considers the role of racial and economic inequality.

*Jay: I think it’s good in a way, but in a way it’s not good. I understand why it came into existence because how people of color always not starting from an equal playing field and since we people of color— who are lower class than white people— that’s a good thing for affirmative action. Then again, let’s just say for instance it’s a colored person and a white person. A person of color on the same economic field, same background, everything is the same. Why is it fair for the person of color to get in just because of their skin and not the white person— they have the same grades and everything. But that’s not the case, so that’s why affirmative action is good in a way. [It’s not the case that] people of color and white people always start off on the same playing field. Let’s say for instance both parents went to the same college, same degree, same annual pay. If you just look at it— we know that it’s not true. If it were true, affirmative action would give the person of color just because like affirmative action has like a certain amount of people of color. But that’s not the case. That’s why affirmative action is good. It’s not a real support system but it takes into account that people of color are not on an equal playing field with white people. It tends to be overwhelmingly a lot of people of color who don’t have the same financial support as white people.*

His self-deliberation on the policy of affirmative action reflects a nascent yet critical form of discursive democracy advocated for by Moses and Nair (2004). They advance a form of critical discursive democracy that is meant to assist in the development of educational policy in which ideological differences are overcome so that they do not impede discussion, thereby allowing for policy development amid shared understandings. Self-deliberation on policy issues can provide a prerequisite experience prior to making, taking, or advocating for a particular action. Those who self-deliberate publicly may be pedagogically incited to consider a multiple viewpoints, uncertainties, contexts, decisions, and/or possible outcomes of proposed decisions on various stakeholders. In the following narrative vignette, Pang relives difficult experiences in school that concern race and language.

*Pang*

The next participant, Pang, identified as an Asian student (Hmong) whose first language is Hmong. She immigrated to the U.S. when she was eight and expressed past and present difficulty adjusting culturally and learning English. She cried repeatedly during the interviews when retelling her life stories related to education, assimilation, and “acting White” as a failed method of securing social acceptance. The following prompt from the protocol on social justice education invoked an episode of self-deliberation. *If you could change anything about the education system in the U.S., what would you change?*

*Pang: I know this is kind of extreme, it is just an idea I think may benefit students. Personally, maybe if I was segregated in a way... That’s wrong. I think it’s wrong but I think it might be kind of good. I don’t know if the word is segregation but like separate Asian students and Hmong students and Caucasian students but then teach them all the same things. But students learn at different rates and paces so I think students might feel more comfortable if they’re around the type of people they know and the type of people*
they’re comfortable with so that they might learn a little bit better. But that’s like strict [laughing] cause we’re not like that in the United States.

Pang deliberated on whether racial/ethnic separation or segregation was valuable and worthwhile or not. Her use of the word ‘but’ signaled her changing perspective. There were three explicit uses in the above excerpt and two shifts where “[but]” was implied: Her self-deliberation“…extreme, [but] it is just an idea I think may benefit students” and “Personally, maybe if I was segregated in a way...[but] That’s wrong.” told her partial life history (“maybe if I was segregated”) as a student who did not receive the pedagogical and curricular approach for which she attempted to advocate. The policy issues evoked in her self-deliberation involves language learning and racial segregation (self-segregation, de jure, de facto).

Discussion and Recommendations

These prospective teachers engaged in a public act of self-deliberation when confronted with questions posed by the researcher. The participants’ narratives challenge several dominant narratives of over- or under-valuation of education among poor and working class families of color: valuing athletics over academics, lack of parental involvement, model minority stereotype, and the assumption that people of color need less preparation for tackling injustice than aspiring educator/administrators who are White. These prospective teachers demonstrated different needs, opportunities, and challenges that informed their developing conceptions of social justice education. Their self-deliberations suggest that social justice values related to race and education can become transparent and evolve through self-deliberation on problems that continue to vex educators and policy makers. Self-deliberation provided a prerequisite experience; preparation for collective deliberations such as working through arguments, rationales, and justifications for decision-making. These prospective educators responded to matters in which they were implicated as they both imagined that in their future roles as teachers they would be confronted with similar issues among students with whom they wanted to work: English language learners (Pang) and African American males (Jay). Through self-deliberation, they voiced their uncertainties and perspectives on issues as they understood them at that time. Self-deliberation can serve as a tool for counter-storytelling, voicing perspective, and naming one’s reality.

Although there are many ways to incite and support self-deliberation across social diversity and justice, I briefly describe two approaches in the literature: social activism through intergroup dialogue, and testimony. Schoem and Hurtado (2001) describe intergroup dialogue as a form of deliberative democracy for use in schools, colleges, communities, and places of work; a grassroots approach that hinges on facilitated dialogue in small groups leading to social action. This model addresses the tension between deliberation and action, and acknowledges the difficulty of communication across social group difference as noted by social theorist Iris M. Young (2001). She describes the dissonance in democratic theory between the stance of the deliberative democrat and the grass roots approach of the social activist.

Individuals and organizations seeking to undermine injustice and promote justice need both to engage in discussion with others to persuade them that there are injustices that ought to be remedied and to protest and engage in direct action” (p. 698)…and “although they usually cannot occur together, the best democratic theory will affirm them both while recognizing the tensions between them. (Young, 2001, p. 689)
Dialogue and activism can promote the development of deliberative democrats who engage in grassroots social action.

Sanders (1997) suggests an alternative model of deliberation based on giving testimony; telling one’s story to a broader group. As worldviews across various groups differ, testimony has the potential to allow for the expression of different perspectives rather than their erasure through the search for commonality or resolution. Testimony as oral history can function as a social justice project in which the “stories from participants, most often marginalized in society”…” become part of the historical record and, thus, the continuity of a society” (Janesick, 2007, p. 199). Intergroup dialogue and testimony can work in tandem with self-deliberation allowing educators from marginalized groups to speak of the lived experiences and insert counternarratives into dominant discourses concerning education decision-making and desired outcomes.

**Conclusion**

While public acts of self-deliberation might echo from teachers of any racial and/or cultural background, the expressions of students from underrepresented groups are unique given the unequal power exchanges related to social positionality that affect the micro-level context and the authority of their contributions. The quality and degree to which social difference is significant in the classroom, overall program, or local community shades or illuminates the contributions of those uniquely situated/positioned amid differences historically constructed around dispersals of power and social goods. Politically and/or socially underrepresented students who publicly self-deliberate are at risk of having their statements (mis)appropriated, interrupted, derailed or silenced so that their stories may be suppressed or accepted as overly authoritative (Ladson-Billings, 1996). As discussions concerning race are still avoided (Pollock, 2004), self-deliberation can serve as an entry point for race conscious dialogue.

As a method of sense-making, self-deliberation can be an act of strategic negotiation within learning contexts where there is a thin critical mass of support as others are less able to debate a deliberator who advances multiple views or stances. Teacher and administrator education preparation programs that are concerned with issues of equity and justice in curriculum, pedagogy, and student achievement could support self-deliberation as a pedagogical act to prepare educators to participate in decisions as curriculum leaders. How educators respond to moments of self-deliberation will take us closer to or further away from democratic bankruptcy.
References


