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Review of Democracy , Deliberation and Education by Robert Asen (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015)

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Abstract

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Keywords

deliberation, school boards, education - America, education - Wisconsin

Democracy, Deliberation and Education is comprised of case studies of three school boards' deliberations over a two-year period, during which board members addressed local educational concerns in the context of accountability and market-driven state and federal policies. Through these cases, Robert Asen demonstrates how theoretical issues in deliberative decision-making manifest in the work of local boards as they decide how to approach issues like district extra-curricular activities, finances, personnel and open enrollment. Drawing on the work of deliberative theorists such as Habermas, Rawls, Dewey, and others, the book explores themes raised by the boards' deliberation and argues that school boards are positioned to play a pivotal role in advancing the "Great Community" that Dewey envisioned.

The book includes five theme-based chapters, in addition to an introduction and conclusion. Early on, Asen references public sphere theory when he describes school boards as "strong publics" – publics engaged in both opinion formation and policy-making. As such, they serve as sites where "participants might engage one another to develop collectively perspectives and positions that each might not hold individually and to act on these perspectives and positions in charting a common course" (p. 35). Asen argues that school boards are distinct from most other examples of strong publics because they operate within an "education policy network." This requires them to spend time interacting in state and federal policymaking environments, as well as in direct interaction with local constituents. From this unique space, the book explores how board members—as interlocutors—negotiate a policy environment which may constrain deliberation, while responding to contingent developments, localized needs and contested matters within their communities.

The next three chapters focus on individual cases and address the themes of ideology, scarcity and expertise. "Ideology" is explored through an analysis of one board's decision to officially recognize a Gay Straight Alliance that had been informally meeting in the district's schools. The chapter describes how dynamics of ideology interact in school board deliberations where participants' individual commitments, district policy, and the law produce public tensions and board members are forced to make a decision under threat of a discrimination lawsuit. The next chapter considers the resources a district needs to deliberate productively. By examining budget deliberations in a community severely impacted by the 2008 recession, Asen explores how "scarcity" influenced the board's decision to adopt a budget that would paradoxically result in a decrease in state funding. In this case, a system of scarcity—demarcated by high community unemployment rates, a strained school budget, relative power differences among community stakeholders and perceptions of people's economic suffering—influenced deliberations and produced results that were both non-rational and counter to the intent of state laws

seeking to ameliorate funding inequalities. The theme of “expertise” is explored through the case of a school board serving a more affluent community. In this school district, board members disproportionately engaged expertise over community values when making decisions about which students should be welcomed into the district under state laws promoting school choice. The chapter reveals how market models of expertise and education can pervade deliberations and limit the scope of information and concerns engaged in decision-making. This, in turn, can produce outcomes that weaken opportunities for public school students to learn in classrooms that reflect the economic, racial and ethnic diversity of the broader public.

These themes problematize the roles of school board representatives within a networked policy environment and highlight the significant influence that board members’ deliberations can have on the education of citizens in communities. Asen’s fifth chapter connects his analysis and future scholarship by offering a conceptual framework for understanding how trust, as a transformative resource in deliberation, is enacted and produced through the discursive experiences of school boards. Specifically, he argues that trust can be understood through attention to the qualities of flexibility, forthrightness, engagement and heedfulness evidenced by participants in deliberations. These practices might also serve as a practical framework for developing board members’ capacities to engage in productive decision making that connects the values and concerns of citizens to democratic ideals within a complex public policy environment.

In *Democracy, Deliberation and Education*, Asen bridges rhetorical, public sphere, and deliberative theories by framing school board deliberations as processes that occurs through multiple encounters among interlocutors as they engage in “considering and weighing various perspectives and proposals for what they regard as issues of common concern” (p. 9). Through deliberations that occur over time, citizens and policy makers engage in a range of rational and conflicted discursive practices, through which they express concerns, understand, and react to the complex factors that inform collective problem solving. In the final chapter, Asen connects his analysis to Dewey’s vision of creative democracy, situating it in the heart of every community, the public school. He argues that because school boards are strong publics that provide opportunities for local participation in a networked public sphere, it may be possible to strengthen democracy by revaluing local participation and local perspectives in the deliberations of school boards, and connecting school board deliberations to those of state and federal policy makers. School board members can play a role in this process by attending to the quality of their deliberations, asking questions not posited by an accountability regime, foregrounding meaning-making in educational policy and practice, and engaging

legislators. As a theoretical and practical work, Asen book should be required reading for educational policy-makers at the local and national level. It would also be of interest to citizens who wish to understand how market forces affect decision-making in public education and how local democratic practices might counter those forces.