

# Teaching and Learning on the Verge

Democratic Education in Action



Multicultural Education Series  
James A. Banks, Editor

Shanti Elliott

"Shanti Elliott offers an engaging whirlwind of examples and ideas in examining civic action among and with youth in a multicultural democracy."

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Harvard Graduate School of Education

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Our changing world demands that all students become agile thinkers who can develop sturdy interpersonal and civic relationships. This book proposes that teachers who think of learning as "playing with power" tap into the creative and subversive energies of young people, making academic work far more consequential than a piece of paper with a grade on it. Young people must learn to *play democracy* just as they might play a violin or a sport, not as a game of "let's pretend," but participating fully in the language, spaces, and possibilities of public life.

Based on 20 years of teaching experience and research in schools across the country (including Rudy Lozano Leadership Academy in Chicago, June Jordan School for Equity in San Francisco, and Urban Academy in New York), *Teaching and Learning on the Verge* demonstrates how educators in all disciplines can integrate civic engagement, multicultural literacy, and leadership into their classrooms and programs. Featuring voices from literature and philosophy in dialogue with the living stage of classrooms, streets, and community spaces, this book offers an imaginative and practical guide to democratic education.



Shanti Elliott directs the civic engagement program at the Francis W. Parker School in Chicago. She also co-leads the Teachers' Inquiry Project and teaches at the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University.

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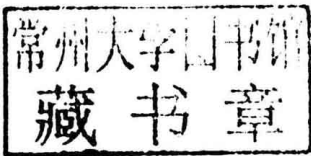
# Teaching and Learning on the Verge

Democratic Education



**Teaching and Learning on the Verge**  
Democratic Education in Action

**Shanti Elliott**



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*We may have reached a moment in our history when teaching and learning, if they are to happen meaningfully, must happen on the verge.*

*—Maxine Greene*



## Series Foreword

Horace Mann and other early constructors of American education viewed citizenship participation as one of the essential goals of the common or public schools. A widely shared belief among American educators prior to the harsh critiques of the schools by revisionist historians and sociologists during the 1970s was that public schools fostered democracy and promoted social and economic equality. In 1972, Colin Greer published a scathing critique and revisionist interpretation of schools that argued that the belief that schools taught and exemplified democracy was the “great school legend.” The schools not only did not teach or promote democracy argued Greer, they perpetuated social-class stratification and reinforced the class divisions within the larger society.

*Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradiction of Economic Life* by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976)—an erudite and complex Marxist analysis of U.S. schools—reinforced and extended Greer’s thesis. Bowles and Gintis argued that the social organization of schools was similar to the capitalist workforce structure and that schools reproduced and mirrored the hierarchy of capitalist institutions. Consequently, schools socialized different classes of youth for their adult roles and statuses in life. In 1978, Diane Ravitch published a searing critique of the revisionist interpretations of U.S. schools and argued that they distorted the historical record. The schools, she argued, have facilitated the social mobility of immigrant and low-income students.

In this illuminating and timely book, Shanti Elliott reveals a keen awareness of the critiques and counter-critiques of schools that have been developed by scholars such as Greer, Bowles and Gintis, and Ravitch—as well as of the limitations and possibilities of schools. She describes the contradictions that exist when schools try to educate for citizen participation and democracy within social, political, and economic contexts—including schools—that violate democratic values. However, Elliott believes that schools can advance democratic citizenship within the contradictory social, political, and economic contexts in which they exist. She formulates a conceptual framework and describes examples that illustrate how teachers can involve students in meaningful civic action projects. Such projects enable students to internalize democratic values and practice civic action skills in school and community

activities in which they acquire critical consciousness, a better understanding of oppressive systems, and take actions that help to make their schools and communities more just and equitable. *Self-reflection*, *questioning power*, and *dialogic hunger* are linchpins of Elliott's framework for teaching democratic values and civic action. One of the major goals of this book is to describe ways in which teachers can help students to raise their level of consciousness and to become social critics and effective civic actors in their local communities, state, and nation.

An essential component of Elliott's conceptualization and thinking is that adults—including teachers—must participate in and become part of the process of democratic change for citizenship education to be effective and authentic for students. Elliott's conceptualization and ideas about democracy and civic education mirror the ideas of democracy in John Dewey's (1938) classic book, *Experience and Education*. He states that "all genuine education comes about through experience" (p. 13). Elliott believes that for civic educational experiences to be effective and meaningful for students, adults must participate in them with students as collaborators and co-learners. They must also raise the level of consciousness of students about the social, economic, and political contexts in which they live. In formulating her concepts of democratic education and civic action, Elliott draws thoughtfully upon the ideas of transformative educational theorists such as Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire, and Mikhail Bakhtin to create a framework for teaching democracy and civic action that is teacher friendly, classroom tested, and visionary.

Elliott's conceptual framework for teaching democratic education and civic action is especially timely because of the growing population of students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups who are attending schools in the United States and in other nations. The racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious polarizations in the United States and in other nations are revealed by the tensions between police and communities of color in cities such as Ferguson, Missouri, and Pasco, Washington; as well as by the violent events that occurred in Paris after the publication of a contentious cartoon of Muhammad by the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. The growing income gap between adults (Stiglitz, 2012)—as well as between youth that are described by Robert D. Putnam (2015) in *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*—is another significant reason why it is important to teach democracy and civic education in schools. As Elliott points out, schools should help youth from diverse groups learn to live together and to create communities that are characterized by civic equality, democracy, and social justice. The increasing and complex dimensions of diversity within U.S. schools and in schools around the world make her argument especially compelling.

American classrooms are experiencing the largest influx of immigrant students since the beginning of the 20th century. Almost 14 million new

immigrants—documented and undocumented—settled in the United States in the years from 2000 to 2010. Less than 10% came from nations in Europe. Most came from Mexico, nations in Asia, and nations in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Central America (Camarota, 2011). The influence of an increasingly diverse population on U.S. schools, colleges, and universities is and will continue to be enormous.

Schools in the United States are more diverse today than they have been since the early 1900s when a multitude of immigrants entered the United States from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe. In 2014, the National Center for Education Statistics estimated that the percentage of students from ethnic minority groups made up more than 50% of the students in prekindergarten through 12th grade in public schools, an increase from 40% in 2001 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Language and religious diversity is also increasing in the U.S. student population. The 2012 American Community Survey estimated that 21% of Americans aged 5 and above (61.9 million) spoke a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Harvard professor Diana L. Eck (2001) calls the United States the “most religiously diverse nation on earth” (p. 4). Islam is now the fastest-growing religion in the United States, as well as in several European nations such as France, the United Kingdom, and The Netherlands (Banks, 2009; Cesari, 2004).

The major purpose of the Multicultural Education Series is to provide preservice educators, practicing educators, graduate students, scholars, and policymakers with an interrelated and comprehensive set of books that summarizes and analyzes important research, theory, and practice related to the education of ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic groups in the United States and the education of mainstream students about diversity. The dimensions of multicultural education, developed by Banks (2004) and described in the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* and in the *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education* (Banks, 2012), provide the conceptual framework for the development of the publications in the Series. The dimensions are content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering institutional culture and social structure. The books in the Multicultural Education Series provide research, theoretical, and practical knowledge about the behaviors and learning characteristics of students of color, language minority students, low-income students, and other minoritized population groups, such as LGBTQ youth (Mayo, 2014).

Elliott's book is especially timely and needed because educational initiatives and developments such as the Race to the Top competitive grant for states and school districts and the Common Core State Standards Initiative—because they focus on high-stakes tests and hold teachers and schools accountable for the performance of their students on standardized tests—have resulted in an alarming neglect of the teaching of social

studies and civic education in U.S. schools. The focus has shifted to a heavy emphasis on subjects such as math and reading, which make up a disproportionate share of the items on high-stakes standardized tests.

A recent report on civic education, *Youth Civic Development and Education* (Malin, Ballard, Attai, et al., 2014)—published jointly by the Stanford Center on Adolescence at Stanford University and the Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington—lament the declining importance of civic education in U.S. schools. The report states:

Despite the clear urgency of this mission, civic education as practiced in schools throughout the United States is not preparing students for effective participation in civic life. Few young people are sufficiently motivated to become engaged in civic and political activity. . . . Not surprisingly, sectors of the population from low-income and marginalized communities have been most affected by what has been called “the civic engagement gap.” (p. 7)

Elliott’s cogent voice about the need to make democratic education an important mission of schools echoes the sentiments of civic education scholars since the turn of the century—including George Counts (1932), John Dewey (1938), Amy Gutmann (2004), Walter Parker (2002), James Banks (2007), and Joel Westheimer (2015)—who have described why democratic education is essential for the perpetuation of a democracy. As Walter Parker insightfully argues, democracies are fragile and must be continually reconstructed and renewed in order for them to survive. With this book and its practical and imaginative suggestions for schools and communities, Elliott makes an important contribution to the litany of compelling voices that remind us that democracies and democratic citizens must be continually created and reinvented if democratic societies and nations are to survive.

—James A. Banks

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