From Competition to Collaboration, Accountability to Responsibility, and Patriotism to Ecological Cosmopolitanism: A Book Review of Education and Democracy in the 21st Century

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From Competition to Collaboration, Accountability to Responsibility, and Patriotism to Ecological Cosmopolitanism:  
A Book Review of *Education and Democracy in the 21st Century*  
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Drawing on John Dewey’s foundational work on education, Nel Noddings provides, in her recent book, *Education and Democracy in the 21st Century* (Teachers College Press, 2013), a vision of education as a multi-aim enterprise in which schools are responsible for all three domains of life: personal (home and family), occupational, and civic, both domestic and global. The book is a necessary intervention especially in an era when educational discourse, in the U.S and around the world, is saturated with talks about standardization, Common Core curriculum, accountability, and test scores, etc. Her thesis is that, in the 21st Century, we should replace some of the 20th Century thinking such as competition, bureaucracy, overspecialization, and standardization with habits of cooperation, connection, and critical and creative thinking. As a philosopher and professor of education who had 15 years of public school experiences, she argues that we must find ways in our educational aims and school curriculum to preserve our commitment to democratic values laid out by Dewey almost a century ago while adapting to the societal changes since then. Noddings’ vision of education for the new millennium provided in the book is thought provoking and particularly urgent in current educational discourse.

Focusing on American secondary schools, Noddings begins with a critical examination of current educational ideas such as standards, teacher accountability, and choice. She considers them from two different perspectives: performance standards or content standards vs. opportunity to learn standards; accountability vs. responsibility; parental choice of school vs. student choice of school’s activities. She then proceeds to discuss democracy and, following Dewey, Emerson, Whitman, and Gutmann, considers democracy as participatory through deliberative thinking and communication (dialogue). She specifically considers equality as a core concept in democracy and problematizes current struggles for equality through common curriculum, degrees and diplomas, etc.. She proposes, “a reasonable approach to equal opportunity requires the recognition of differences in student talents and interests” (p. 27), which she maintains should be the focus of secondary schooling. She argues that a closer look at the aims of education and a revitalization of the aims-talk is essential to both democracy and education. She suggests “a hierarchy of ends: aims, goals, objectives” (p. 40). This is foundational in her argument to “teach from the top-down” (p. 108), that is, to start with big pictures and big questions (aims) and then move down to specific goals and further down to detailed learning objectives for each lesson in all disciplines.

With the discussions on current problems and democratic values in education in the first four chapters, in the following chapters, Noddings mainly challenges “the present organization of the curriculum into specialized subjects that rarely make connections across disciplines and almost totally ignore the great existential questions” (p. 57). She explores the place of the liberal arts in contemporary education, the possibilities to include aims from the personal, occupational, and civic domains into the curriculum, and connect the disciplines to each other and to life itself. She considers various aims of education for home life and parenting, for ecological cosmopolitanism and peace on Earth, for vocational development, for moral and spiritual life, and for national and global citizenship. In Chapter 11, the last chapter, she exercises critical thinking in revisiting the problems raised in the beginning of the book. She summarizes her argument as ecological, not only in natural world, but also to search for balance in our thinking.
on education to support satisfying ways of life for whole persons under the guidance of 21st Century aims in all three of the great domains: personal, occupational, and civic, both domestic and global.

Noddings provides a vision for education in the 21st Century that is comprehensive in its scope and especially urgent in current educational context in the U.S and around the world. The contemporary proliferation of discourses, such as “US public schools are failing” based on international test scores, not only have the effect of pushing all educators and educational policymakers to be accountable to reform US schools to “out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world”, (p.2), but also reclaim the habits of dominance and war, and situate competition as the major theme of our world. In contrast, Noddings urges us to embrace collaboration, interconnection, global democracy, and ecological cosmopolitanism as the aims for 21st Century education. Her vision is comprehensive in two aspects. First of all, she argues for an education not just for intellectual development, but also for an ecological balance of all three great domains of life for the whole person: personal, occupational, and civic. Second, she contends that we should teach from the big pictures, that is, from the fundamental aims of education (the big questions) to specific goals of disciplines and then to concrete lesson objectives. She argues that we should organize the disciplines as connected to each other and to life itself. She draws on her rich personal experiences from her work in public schools to illustrate her vision, although some of which are anecdotal and hard to follow at times.

Noddings’ main approach to achieve her aims is to “stretch the disciplines from within” (p. 47, 62-64, 69). She suggests that the basic structure of curriculum in U.S will not have dramatic change in the foreseeable future. Therefore, she maintains that we have to work within the disciplinary structure of English, mathematics, social studies, science, and foreign languages, etc. Her proposal is conservative in this sense, but to some extent practical to re-envision the curriculum and pedagogy. One way to stretch the disciplines from within, as she suggests, is to encourage more interdisciplinary work across subject matters and through what she calls “lateral excursions” (p. 62). For example, as she discussed, “wherever possible we should start our units of study with big ideas as suggested by E.O. Wilson—not with unmotivated details—and then move down the line to details as they are needed and laterally to the consequences or relations in other disciplines” (p. 62). However, one of her examples was that all teachers should be English teachers, especially in helping students to master “standard oral English,” which to me—and she recognizes it in her book too—is subject to critical scrutiny in terms of whose “standard oral English” and how that involves complicated power relations.

Noddings raises many important philosophical questions in education for us to think about in the book. There have been discussions about the relations and differences between “education” and “schooling” in philosophy of education for long. Noddings’ effort, though with difficulties, attempts to bridge the two. While maintaining the aims of education for global democracy in the 21st Century, she discusses the possibilities in secondary schooling to achieve those educational aims. While I am not particularly convinced that schooling in the 21st Century is inherently different from schooling in the 20th Century or if there is a clear mark between 20th and 21st Centuries, yet I agree with her that we need to embrace collaboration more than competition, think about responsibility rather than accountability, and recognize interconnection between different disciplines, countries, and realms of life instead of separating and overspecializing them. I would recommend the book to secondary school teachers, pre-service teachers and teacher educators as a starting point to think about the big pictures of educational aims and continue to explore ways of realizing them in our curriculum and pedagogy.
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i In particular, *Democracy and Education*, which will soon mark its 100th anniversary, lays out Dewey’s most foundational thinking about education.