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Educating for Empathy: Literacy Learning and Civic Engagement

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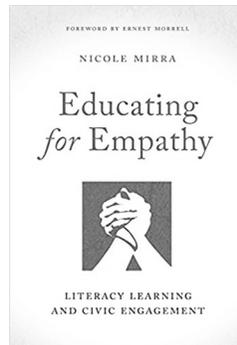
by Christopher B. Crowley, Ph.D. and Anna Fleury

Nicole Mirra's recent book, *Educating for Empathy: Literacy Learning and Civic Engagement*, is an especially timely publication and a thoroughly enjoyable read. For educators seeking to support their students by engaging them in powerful forms of literacy learning that foster critical understandings of the world around them, *Educating for Empathy* is highly relevant. Currently, across the United States young people are attempting to bring issues that they see as meaningful and pertinent more directly into the purview of public discourse and debate. Such interests among today's youth serve as an important lever for bolstering student engagement in their local schools and communities, in addition to offering educators unique opportunities to support students' literacy learning in meaningful and impactful ways.

Mirra proposes the concept of "critical civic empathy"—which has as its intended outcome the humanization of all people—as necessary and central to the work of contemporary teachers and educators, as well as framing it as a challenge to the fields of English education and literacy. At the same time, one of the unique challenges for educators is that this involves important but ongoing work. Not only must educators design rich and worthwhile opportunities to support students' literacy learning and civic engagement, but also they must justify the significance of such undertakings within the contexts of very real pressures teachers encounter as a result of high stakes testing (Au, 2009), the intensifying standardization of teaching practices, and the ongoing demands of bureaucratic performativities (Luke, 2004).

Mirra's work is very much informed by Greene's (1977,

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1995) emphasis on supporting the development of a "social imagination"—in essence, the ability to imagine and work towards bringing into fruition a more just and equitable vision of the world. This line of critical thought is similar to what Paulo Freire (2000) discusses, the idea that people established contemporary sociopolitical and institutional structures, and that as such people can also create something that is different and better. Indeed, critical literacies are integral to the formation and maintenance of our civic identities, as Mirra carefully illustrates for readers.

Embedded throughout *Educating for Empathy* is Mirra's recognition that educators are frequently positioned in ways that require them to justify the necessity of fostering critical literacies, robust forms of empathy, and active civic engagement. A key question that Mirra encourages readers to consider throughout the book is:

how can teachers better advocate for the importance of empathy in a world where apathy exists, and divisive politics dominate?

Regarding the layout of the book, the first two chapters of the book provide an essential theoretical foundation for the importance of critical civic empathy and its centrality to the work of English/language arts teachers. In addition, Mirra offers vivid descriptions of her research with two high school English teachers teaching in Los Angeles, in addition to her own classroom teaching experiences as a high school debate coach in New York.

Chapters 3 and 4 speak to how youth participatory action research, digital literacies, and multimodal literacy practices have a proven potential to support the kinds of critical civic empathy and engagement necessary for bolstering robustly critical forms of democracy. Fostering students' agentic understandings of civic participation, wherein they are active participants in not only their own critical literacy learning but also in the public sphere, directly challenges the bigotry of low expectations placed upon students from historically marginalized backgrounds. To illustrate the importance of this work and its significance, Mirra highlights the ongoing efforts of educators who are actively involved in National Writing Project and provides readers with a detailed understanding of how these efforts matter in ways that are highly meaningful for both teachers and students. In doing so, Mirra offers practical suggestions and ideas for practicing educators and preservice teachers.

The fifth chapter is intended to challenge its audience. Mirra encourages readers to reflect on their own experiences, identities, and beliefs in addition to asking them to sincerely consider how one's ongoing work as an educator remains an essential part of the transformative potential of education. In concluding the book, Mirra focuses on need to instill, or more likely re-instill, a sense of hope within the fields of literacy and English education—a belief that joy, love, justice, empathy, support for one another, etcetera, can more meaningfully address important aspects of learning than reductive measures of student outcomes.

While the book clearly speaks to the broader contexts of literacy learning, *Educating for Empathy* also provides rich descriptions, practical applications, and a wealth of ideas for how to support this crucial work not only within English/language arts classrooms but across the curriculum. At the same time the book raises some important questions that we believe deserve further exploration in future research. First, how can teachers maintain the necessary energy to engage in this work? Following that, what structures exist and what kinds of structures need to be developed to support educators in this work? And, if/when taken up at institutional levels, to what extent will public schools be willing to invest substantively in supporting such endeavors in authentic (i.e., not superficial) ways? In thinking about current trends related to the turn, once again, toward practice-based models of teacher education (Zeichner, 2012), what might research like Mirra's mean for both preservice and in-service teacher education and how might this or similarly minded efforts better support critical democracy in teacher education (Carter Andrews, Richmond, & Floden, 2018; Crowley & Apple, 2009)? And lastly, in keeping with the high value that we place on teachers' knowledge (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009; Crowley, 2008), how might some of the ideas presented in *Educating for Empathy* be extended to help inform research on school leadership? The questions that arose for us speak to our appreciation of this book, its timeliness, the thought-provoking ideas, the practical implications, its very worthwhile challenges to the field, and the larger contributions it offers to furthering important discussions surrounding some of the most pressing concerns in education today. *Educating for Empathy* is an incredibly worthwhile book that deserves wide readership and broad consideration.

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