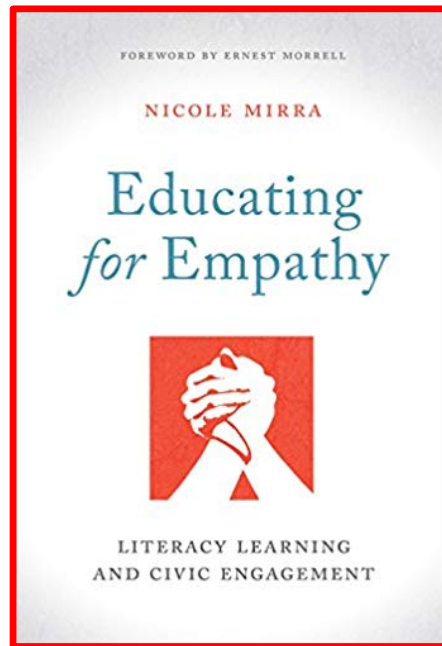


JOLLE@UGA®

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Educating for Empathy: Literacy Learning and Civic Engagement **By Nicole Mirra**

Reviewer: Meghan E. Barnes
University of North Carolina, Charlotte
Charlotte, North Carolina



Citation: Mirra, N. (2018). *Educating for empathy: Literacy learning and civic engagement*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

ISBN: 978-0-8077-5914-1

“The development of empathy in students (and teachers) should be considered a primary goal of education because it offers an organizing principle for our field grounded in hope, love, and a commitment to a more equitable society” (Mirra, 2018, p. 3).

I open this review of *Educating for Empathy: Literacy Learning and Civic Engagement* by quoting the author, Nicole Mirra, to provide a sense of the transformative approach Mirra takes toward her subject matter: empathy and education. However, do not mistake Mirra’s seeming idealism about the power of teaching for empathy for a lack of understanding of the realities, challenges, and tensions teachers, teacher educators, and students experience daily in educational spaces. Although Mirra asserts that what she terms *critical civic empathy* has the potential to foster a more equitable society, she simultaneously recognizes challenges to the development of critical civic empathy and regularly draws on the voices and experiences of practicing teachers and teacher educators who have incorporated the tenets of critical civic empathy into their teaching.

Mirra organizes her book into six sections, each of which I review in greater detail below. In addition to attention to underlying theoretical frameworks, each chapter includes practical tools and tips for practicing teachers, teacher educators, and researchers, as well as discussion questions to encourage ongoing reflection. In the Introduction, Mirra offers the concept of critical civic empathy as distinct from traditional understandings of empathy. She delineates three principles of critical civic empathy, which she refers back to throughout the rest of the text. Aside from the Introduction and Conclusion sections, the five central chapters of the text are aimed at reviewing five ways and spaces within which critical civic empathy might manifest: literary analysis (Chapter 1), debate (Chapter 2),

Youth Participatory Action Research (Chapter 3), technology and connected learning (Chapter 4), and teacher self-reflection (Chapter 5). In the concluding section of the book, Mirra explores various tensions that teachers may have faced when attempting to take a pedagogical approach aimed at developing critical civic empathy. In this review, I provide an overview of each section of Mirra’s book and then close with my own critical analysis.

Introduction Section

Mirra opens the book by drawing on the words of President Obama (2006) to discuss the “empathy deficit” that has slowly pervaded U.S. society over the recent decades. As has increasingly become customary, Mirra recognizes that the field of education will (and has) been called upon to address issues of empathy with students and teachers. Rather than rejecting this responsibility, Mirra argues that developing empathy in students should be a central goal of education aimed at developing a more equitable society.

Although she will ultimately evolve the concept of empathy to critical civic empathy, Mirra initially draws on the German translation to define empathy as “moving beyond oneself and *into* the perspective of another person” (2018, p. 4). Similar to empathy’s ability to build connections, Mirra also discusses the potential for literacy and literature to connect people. Literature can serve as a platform for discussing and developing empathy with students. Thus, the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom can be an appropriate place for educators to begin addressing empathy with students. Regardless of this seeming alignment, Mirra also recognizes that standardized testing and ELA curricular standards are often obstacles for ELA teachers as they try to address empathy in their teaching. Further, Mirra recognizes that “empathy and perspective-taking are politicized and inequitable” (p. 6). Rather than

eschewing the political and power-laden nature of either concept, Mirra proposes that ELA teachers, in particular, make critical civic empathy central to their teaching.

The concept of critical civic empathy rests on three understandings:

1. It begins from a consideration of the position, power, and privilege of all involved.
2. It foregrounds the role of personal experience in the context of public life.
3. It is committed to equity and justice through dialogue and civic action.

Mirra goes on to explain each term in the concept of critical civic empathy, beginning with a discussion of “critical.” Drawing from critical theorists (e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947), Mirra explains that a critical perspective encourages individuals to engage in self-reflection to consider their own positionings and privileges and how they might shape the ways they understand and engage with the world. This connection to the world helps define the “civic” component of critical civic empathy. Thus, developing empathy involves not only self-reflection, but a concomitant recognition of the ways that individual experiences shape (and are shaped by) participation in civic life.

To further distinguish critical civic empathy from other forms of empathy, Mirra offers a typology (2018, p. 11). Mutual humanization lies along the horizontal axis of the typology, with orientation toward social and political action defining the vertical axis. Depending on an individual’s motivations and orientations, their behaviors will fall into one of four categories: imaginative refusal (i.e., those who disregard mutual humanization and attempt to break down faith in democratic action), false empathy (i.e., those who use the language of empathy with no true interest in mutual

humanization), individual empathy (i.e., those who value mutual humanization, but do not take social action), or critical civic empathy. Mirra uses this typology to highlight the political nature of empathy, as well as the important role of social action in developing critical civic empathy.

It is against this backdrop that Mirra presents a brief overview of the entire book. As she reviews the conceptual foci of each chapter, Mirra simultaneously introduces some of the teachers, pre-service teachers, and students whose experiences will be featured throughout the book.

Chapter 1: Honing the Social Imagination through Literary Analysis

In the first chapter of the book, Mirra focuses primarily on the relation between literature and empathy and the potential for stories to encourage readers to move into others’ perspectives. Mirra then considers how the concept of critical civic empathy might be used as a frame for the ways that literature is taught to secondary students. Within this approach, students would be encouraged to bring their own social positioning and experiences with them to the reading of any text, identify (or not) with the characters and experiences presented in the text, and then take these identifications with them into the world, as they interact with other people and places. For Mirra, then, approaching literature from the concept of critical civic empathy involves civic action.

Mirra draws appropriately on three theorists and educators whose work further suggests a link between literature and the development of critical civic empathy. First, Mirra looks to Morrison (1992) who considered authors to be respondents to culture. The act of reading, then, could be considered an act of civic engagement, as the reader is involved in and responding to the civic

experiences of the author. Next, Mirra turns to Greene's (2000) conception of reading as a process of emerging awareness. For Greene, reading and dialogue release the "social imagination" (p. 5), allowing students to not only consider what is, but also imagine what could and should be in a just society. Finally, Mirra references Appleman's (2009) findings about the capacity of secondary students to read texts as social artifacts. Importantly, though, Appleman (echoed by Mirra) holds that students' personal connections to texts are not to be discounted but remain significant to literature instruction.

Against this conceptual backdrop, Mirra provides two illustrative case studies from the classrooms of practicing teachers who have incorporated an approach of critical civic empathy to the teaching of literature. Specifically, Mirra was interested in the ways that two teachers, Jerica and Ashley, brought their commitments to democratic engagement to their teaching. Jerica's class was designed such that students were given opportunities to showcase their literacy skills, while simultaneously learning how to connect literacy to community empowerment and social awareness. Similarly, Ashley designed her literature class to encourage students to make connections to and become more critical of the larger communities surrounding them. Both teachers expressed commitments to critical literacy wherein students simultaneously interrogated the texts themselves, as well as the social contexts surrounding those texts. Ultimately, Mirra draws on the theories and practices presented in this chapter to demonstrate the ways that literary texts can help develop students' social imaginations, as well as their ideas for change and action.

Chapter 2: Civic Communication through Debate

In the second chapter of the book, Mirra offers debate as a powerful "generator of critical civic empathy" (2018, p. 42). Effective debate requires two components: (1) respect for the humanity of another and (2) a shared foundation of fact and valid information. When grounded in respect and facts, Mirra suggests that debate has the potential to position students as engaged and thoughtful citizens, to build trust within a democratic community, and to foster mutual humanization and civic action (i.e., the development of critical civic empathy).

In this chapter Mirra turns to her collaborations with Ben, an educator in New York working to use debate as a method to implement reading practices across disciplines and to engage students, teachers, and administrators with their communities. As a researcher alongside Ben, Mirra found that debate had the potential to improve students' academic literacy and critical thinking skills and the development of civic engagement and critical consciousness. After reviewing the organization of the debate structure, Mirra incorporates students' voices describing their experiences with debate to illustrate the overarching findings of the study. In particular, Mirra notes the potential for debate to encourage students to recognize and respond to multiple perspectives on a topic—also foundational components for developing empathy.

Mirra then transitions to a discussion of the correlation between debate and the development of critical civic empathy, in particular. Drawing on Dewey's (1916) early work on dialogue and democracy, Mirra positions knowledge as developing through dialogue. For classrooms to foster critical civic empathy, students must also have opportunities to consider what kinds of dialogue are

permitted and excluded in various educational and social spaces. Ultimately, any classroom-based dialogue and debate must be grounded in goals of humanization to be effective. Finally, Mirra reminds readers that such humanizing debates must also inspire, and ideally result in, civic action. Mirra ends the chapter by sharing a case study from a middle school that made debate a school-wide initiative. Drawing on this case, along with her experiences working with Ben in New York, Mirra offers ideas for teachers who are interested in incorporating debate into their own literacy curricula.

Chapter 3: Harnessing Youth Experience through Participatory Action Research

In the third chapter, Mirra offers Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as a method for potentially disrupting the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 85). Mirra uses Tyack and Cuban’s concept of the “grammar of schooling” to refer to the historical ways that schools have positioned teachers and students, effectively constraining what they (teachers and students) believe to be possible in educational spaces. Rather than reifying teachers’ positions as powerful and knowledgeable and students’ positions as powerless and lacking knowledge, YPAR foregrounds students’ experiences in and questions about the communities to which they do and do not belong. Furthermore, YPAR has the potential to develop critical civic empathy because it encourages students to “see their own thoughts, experiences, and voices as valued sources of knowledge” (Mirra, 2018, p. 53).

The bulk of the third chapter of the book is composed of student and teacher examples of YPAR. Mirra begins by sharing the PowerPoint slides used by a group of California high school students to present the findings of their YPAR project to civic leaders about the quality of public education. Mirra

draws on this exemplar project to discuss the ways that students were able to challenge the traditional “grammar of schooling” through the purposes, practices, and positionings associated with the YPAR process. Finally, Mirra acknowledges that, although YPAR is aimed at highlighting the voices and experiences of students, adults do still play an important role in YPAR. However, instead of being positioned as controllers of the classroom and learning process, in YPAR, teachers (and all adults) are considered listening facilitators. By renegotiating teachers’ roles, YPAR simultaneously positions students as potential producers of knowledge—a phenomenon, Mirra argues, that contributes to the development of critical civic empathy.

YPAR has the potential to develop empathy because “it reorients our ideas about who can speak truth, the forms that truth can take, and how those truths can help us imagine a more just and equitable democracy” (Mirra, 2018, p. 61). Specifically, Mirra returns to the three tenets of critical civic empathy introduced in the beginning of the book. YPAR enables students to consider the ways they are positioned in society, encourages them to recognize the ways that society may position them as merely knowledge consumers, and prepares students to counter these assumptions by drawing on their own stories and experiences. However, Mirra does not oversimplify the YPAR process, but instead recognizes that money, time, resources, and administrative support can present challenges to those hoping to incorporate YPAR into the secondary ELA classroom.

Before closing the chapter, Mirra presents her own experience using YPAR as a frame for her 11th grade American Literature class. Over the course of the school year, Mirra wanted her students to consider tensions in American life through focus texts and their own inquiry projects. Mirra provides a comprehensive overview of the YPAR project,

including the challenges that she faced as a teacher trying to manage students' projects while simultaneously attending to mandated curricula and testing expectations. She also provides a host of resources in the Appendices to support other ELA teachers who are considering integrating YPAR into their own courses.

Finally, Mirra closes the chapter by emphasizing that YPAR can be beneficial and engaging for populations of students not typically labeled as minoritized. Rather, YPAR offers an opportunity for students and teachers of all backgrounds to challenge dominant perspectives and societal norms and to offer new forms of knowledge. Although Mirra recognizes that the YPAR process will involve some productive discomfort for students and teachers, she also reasserts her claim that this discomfort is part of creating critical civic empathy, allowing all involved to better empathize with the diverse experiences and social positionings of others.

Chapter 4: Navigating the Digital Public Sphere through Connected Learning (and Teaching)

To open the fourth chapter, Mirra acknowledges educators' conflicting, and often deficit, perspectives of digital tools. Although Mirra concedes that digital tools can contribute to isolationist tendencies that thwart the development of empathy, she also contends that technology can be leveraged to develop connections between people and ideas, to disrupt traditional conceptions of schooling, and to develop empathy, equity, and justice. Thus, Mirra offers "connected learning" (Ito et al., 2013) as an effective model for thinking about technology integration in schools. Connected learning requires that educators consider the tools students use to learn as well as the methods and purposes for that tool use.

Connected learning involves six learning and design-focused principles. Learning in the connected model must be interest-powered, peer-supported, and academically oriented. Similarly, learning experiences must be designed such that they are production-centered, openly networked, and have a shared purpose. Unfortunately, as Mirra acknowledges, most technology-focused curricula and educational policies are aimed at managing risk, rather than integrating these six learning and design principles into educational spaces. Mirra argues that a connected learning approach to technology integration may allow students and teachers to develop critical civic empathy.

Before moving forward, Mirra pauses to distinguish connected learning from 21st century learning. Whereas 21st century learning is primarily concerned with individual advancement and glorifies the ways that technology contributes to advancement, connected learning is "committed to collective civic advancement and the ways that technology can support innovative and equitable forms of learning" (Mirra, 2018, p. 77). If teachers are to adopt a connected learning model, as opposed to 21st century learning, into their teaching, they need to express commitments to collaboration, curiosity, courage, civic engagement, and care. When presenting these commitments, Mirra not only provides thorough explanations, but also provides diverse examples from educators at multiple levels who endeavored to express these commitments through their teaching. Finally, Mirra closes the chapter by offering activities that educators might use as they work to integrate a connected learning model into their teaching. In particular, Mirra offers her version of "Genius Hour" (visit <http://geniushour.com/> for more information about how Genius Hour was initially conceived), which she integrated into her teacher education coursework, requiring pre-service teachers to select and explore a digital tool that was not intentionally designed for use in schools. Mirra

explains how the acts of exploration and play can allow individuals to engage in connected learning and also challenge traditional ideas about the “grammar of schooling.”

Chapter 5: Practicing What We Preach: Teachers as Civic Agents

Unlike the previous four chapters, in Chapter Five, Mirra does not focus on pedagogical practices but instead encourages educators to engage in self-reflection as they consider the commitments and values that guide their literacy practices with students. In particular, Mirra is concerned with those dispositions teachers will need if they are to view their classrooms as spaces that can cultivate critical civic empathy. To more systematically explore the beliefs that teachers hold about teaching and the relation between those beliefs and teacher actions, Mirra presents the findings of a survey she conducted inquiring into the purposes of high school English education from the purview of practicing teachers. Mirra finds that few respondents addressed the relation among literacy, power, and civic engagement, leading Mirra to question the extent to which these teachers would design instruction and curriculum aligned with the tenets of critical civic empathy.

Mirra tempers these findings by returning to her collaborations with Jerica and Ashley (the teachers whose work was featured in the first chapter of the book). Based on her classroom observations and follow-up discussions with each teacher, Mirra finds that Jerica and Ashley were both constantly mitigating systemic barriers (namely grading and test preparation) to critical literacy pedagogy. Mirra considers the self-reflection that both Jerica and Ashley were engaging in to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the teachers’ tendencies toward self-criticism skirted structural factors that were inevitably shaping what was and was not

possible in their classrooms. However, the regular practice of engaging in self-reflection also contributed to the development of critical civic empathy for these teachers.

To close the chapter, Mirra looks to the findings of a survey conducted by the Inequality Project in 2015. Findings from this survey indicated a positive correlation between the civic engagement of teachers and their propensity to facilitate discussions about social and political issues with students. Mirra draws from these findings to recommend that opportunities to learn about and practice civic engagement be incorporated more regularly in teacher education coursework and professional development for practicing teachers. Mirra goes on to recommend steps that individuals can take to become more civically engaged. Ultimately, Mirra argues that educators need to take the time to educate themselves about current political and social issues and to become active participants in civic life.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In the conclusion Mirra focuses on the enduring tensions that teachers may face as they endeavor to educate for critical civic empathy. In particular, Mirra acknowledges that fostering empathy itself involves tensions. For instance, questions about who does and does not deserve empathy and how to manage the ethics of asking students to empathize with diverse groups are inherent to any considerations of empathy. Mirra discusses the challenges of wrestling with these questions and offers resources that could be helpful to educators as they consider how critical civic empathy as a pedagogical approach will manifest in their classrooms.

Ultimately, though, Mirra argues that the development of critical civic empathy hinges on

personal, professional, and civic action. Mirra offers self-reflection and participation in professional organizations and social media (like Twitter) as effective ways to act personally and professionally. Furthermore, Mirra encourages educators to advocate for political policies that align with the tenets of critical civic empathy, to prioritize collective practitioner inquiry, to develop relationships with diverse community members, and to consider the ways that civic engagement can infuse all academic disciplines (and not just history and social studies). Mirra closes the book by acknowledging the ways that political discourse and digital media are contributing to isolationism and polarization. However, she argues that by refocusing on the possibilities afforded by expanded communication and connection, teachers can better leverage students' political and digital resources to cultivate critical civic empathy.

Critical Review

Mirra addresses a topic that is both complex and timely. As she discusses in the book, current political, social, and media discourse (in the U. S., in particular) stoke the flames of isolationism and polarization. Mirra acknowledges that, in response, educators have been regularly called upon to incorporate attention to empathy and character development to counter growing isolationism and polarization among K-12 students. However, Mirra also critiques both empathy and character development as lacking criticality and action and maintaining attention on individual experiences. Instead, Mirra offers critical civic empathy that calls on individuals to interrogate their current social positionings and histories, build connections to others, and ultimately to act. In effect, then, Mirra does not attempt to oversimplify either empathy or education, but instead embraces and addresses the complex nature of educating for empathy through her writing style and the strategies she uses to

involve and speak to a varied audience of teachers, teacher educators, and researchers.

As she discusses the theoretical underpinnings of her research and claims, Mirra takes on a conversational tone that makes what could otherwise be muddled in stilted academic language more accessible to a broader audience. One of the highlights from Mirra's writing is the ease with which she incorporates the voices of teachers, researchers, and students. Mirra consistently takes an asset-oriented stance toward teachers and students at all levels, always addressing the contextual factors that are shaping their experiences, challenges, and successes. Mirra is familiar with current research and teaching in the field and easily draws on others' work to provide examples of and support for the claims she makes about critical civic empathy within diverse educational spaces. By incorporating "real world" research and teaching exemplars into her chapters, Mirra not only provides researchers and teachers with more concrete and realistic exemplars and resources that could inform their own work, but she is also able to embrace and acknowledge the complexity inherent to a pedagogical approach guided by critical civic empathy.

As mentioned, Mirra consistently acknowledges that teaching is a challenging, politically-laden profession. Through her writing, Mirra embraces the political nature of teaching, in general, and teaching for critical civic empathy, in particular. She uses the introduction of her book to break down the terms critical, civic, and empathy, addressing their historical significance in the field and the current and often contradictory ways they are taken up in educational spaces. Mirra considers the "policy cascades" (Papola-Ellis, 2014) that limit what teachers are able to accomplish in their classrooms, as well as the challenges facing teacher educators who aim to prepare a generation of teachers who

can address the aims of critical civic empathy with future students.

Although I was overall impressed by the critical stance Mirra took toward her subject matter and the care she took to delineate her theoretical understandings of terms, concepts, and practices associated with critical civic empathy, I did feel that Mirra assumed democratic goals of education, without fully problematizing the concept. In Chapter Two, Mirra provides a thorough discussion of ways Dewey's (1916) concept of democracy and dialogue can be leveraged to support democratic goals of education. However, apart from drawing on Dewey to define democracy, Mirra does not fully consider or discuss why she believes that teaching and schooling should continue to be aimed at developing a democratic populace. In our current political climate where definitions of democracy

seem to be varied and conflicting, the goals of schooling in general are questioned, and access to and the scope of public education are in flux, a more thorough discussion of the aims of democratic goals in education *today* seems necessary. In effect, I was left wanting Mirra to have taken a more critical stance toward the democratic foundations of education, before embarking on her more thorough consideration of critical civic empathy.

Regardless of this one criticism, Mirra's book serves as a testament to the complex and political nature of education, while still providing hope to those teachers, teacher educators, and researchers who endeavor to teach for justice, social action, "hope, love, and a commitment to a more equitable society" (Mirra, 2018, p. 3).

References

- Appleman, D. (2009). *Critical encounters in high school English: Teaching literary theory to adolescents* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Greene, M. (2000). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. (1947). *The dialectic of enlightenment*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., Schor, J., Sefton-Green, J., & Watkins, S. C. (2013) *Connected learning: An agenda for research and design*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.
- Morrison, T. (1992). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Papola-Ellis, A. (2014). Teaching under policy cascades: Common core and literacy instruction. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 10(1), 166-187.
- Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.