

## Teaching in the Cracks: Opening and Opportunities for Student-Centered, Action-Focused Curriculum

*By Brian D. Schultz*

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*Teaching in the Cracks* by Brian Schultz is a tight and efficiently written exploration of progressive teaching in action. The slim 126-page, seven-chapter book allows for a quick read and is packed with substantial examples and ideas for how to break out of traditional, formalized PreK-12 curriculum teaching models.

The roots of this book are in the philosophies of John Dewey and other progressive thinkers. The first chapter lays out the thesis: the power and effectiveness of teaching engaging, problem-based lessons rather than blindly following Common Core standards or district curriculum maps. Schultz proposes that teachers find “cracks” in these curriculums in which to grow exciting, student-led learning experiences. For more background on Schultz himself, I recommend reading his book *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom* (Schultz, 2008), which chronicles his experience transitioning away from a traditional curriculum to the progressive model highlighted in this new volume.

*Teaching in the Cracks* is a collection of detailed examples of progressive curricula in action. There are several co-authored chapters, but Schultz provides most of the book’s content. For example, the book uses The Children’s School (TCS) in Illinois to illustrate many of the ideas. Schultz has been very involved in the creation and development of TCS, and his children attended the private elementary school outside of Chicago until he relocated to Miami University in Ohio. Schultz details TCS in Chapter 2; photos and descriptions offer a glimpse into the school’s unique practices. One foundational component is the school’s town hall meetings, at which students are authentic participants in the type of democracy the author promotes. Some examples of topics addressed during these student led town hall meetings are events, like a school dance, or practical problems, such as “hand washing after recess.” In the later example, students developed a system of bathroom monitors to help deal with the after recess bathroom “traffic jam.” Although only briefly discussed, it was also refreshing to read the author’s honest account of the pushback the school received from some parents who criticized this deviation from traditional schooling methods, voicing concerns about whether this type of progressive curriculum would adequately prepare their kids for the rigors of a traditional high school. I could personally relate to these challenges, as I am part of a group of faculty at South Dakota State University that has been developing a new problem-based learning curriculum with a partnering high school, and we have experienced similar concerns from a few parents. I was inspired reading about TCS’s Localizing Ebola Project (Chapter 4) because this South Dakota school is implementing a similar problem-based philosophy of learning as part of a new initiative. In the case of TCS, their student-led project took on a life of its own and students explored related

topics in detail. For example, students conducted experiments and surveyed students on handwashing and sanitation as one related side project.

Chapter 3 makes one of the most deliberate connections to the book's title, with a detailed account of how one teacher found "cracks" in her curriculum that allowed her to insert a Social Action Curriculum Project (SACP) for her high school students. The student-initiated topics covered hot-button teen issues such as sex and drugs, and the teacher effectively worked through some opposition from administration and parents. Another SACP project focused on providing food to those in need and culminated in a student-initiated food drive.

The book's additional authors contribute to the unique flow of the narrative, which is creative, fresh, and solidly connects to the book's overarching thesis. For example, Chapter 4, "The Localizing Ebola Project," is a transcript of Shultz interviewing Will Hudson, a teacher from TCL who began this Ebola project with his students. The question/response format was a welcome change from a traditional scholarly narrative. As a reader, I felt as though I was having a conversation with Hudson:

The project wouldn't die. At that point [after several months of researching how viruses spread and communicating those findings to the students, faculty, and parents], I was more than happy for them to be done. . . . Then there was this really magical moment when all of a sudden there was this shift that occurred, where now the students were dragging me along [the students conducted follow up surveys and interviews]. . . . It kept going for an extra couple of weeks. (p. 64)

Passages such as the one quoted above communicate emotion more effectively than a description of the conversation would have, and the accompanying pictures also helped me, as a reader, to establish a personal connection to the project.

Many of the schools highlighted in this book are either private or charters. The private and charter schools described in the book reflect the ability of these types of schools to adapt flexibly and create innovative models. Traditional public schools could learn from these schools and their progressive approach to curriculum, and to be fair, some public schools do. Where I live, my children attend a traditional public elementary school where parents must volunteer in the classroom every week. The additional support from parents helps deliver some unique curriculum, such as 'choice day,' where students sign up for special topics units that are delivered by parents. Our local school district also offers a Spanish immersion elementary school, and one that focuses on the arts. Public schools can and should embrace some of the nontraditional practices that highlighted by the charter and private schools of this book. It is true public schools are somewhat constrained by state testing and highly qualified teacher requirements, however, as I have seen in my own district, they can still provide innovative offerings despite those challenges.

*Teaching in the Cracks* closes with two chapters on how to support teachers as they attempt to teach in these curriculum "cracks." These chapters provide a litany of resources and tools for putting the ideas from the book into practice. These resources and suggestions are accessible, practical, and helpful. For example, on the topic of social justice and civic engagement, the book

provides brief descriptions and weblinks for organizations such as the Center for Civic Education, Facing History and Ourselves, Teaching Tolerance, and others. In addition, there is a well-organized table of classroom resources ordered by strategy. For instance, if a teacher would like to have her students create a petition, the table would suggest [change.org](http://change.org), [thepetitionsite.com](http://thepetitionsite.com), or [ipetitions.com](http://ipetitions.com). If a teacher were interested in performance art, the table provides a weblink for how to organize a flash mob.

*Teaching in the Cracks* presents many dynamic thoughts for how to educate and prepare students to participate actively in a democratic society. Schultz frequently comments on how students need to learn about and participate in the democratic process, echoing the ideas of Dewey and Paulo Freire on the importance of active learning, tackling complex and relevant problems, and empowering students to be advocates while making meaningful contributions to society. These themes are becoming increasingly important in our country. It is important that we prepare students to be advocates and change agents. For example, if students have strong feelings about the country leaving the Paris Agreement on climate change, then we should equip them to take action, such as creating research informational fliers and sending them to their congressional representatives.

Although outside the scope of this book, reading *Teaching in the Cracks* reinforced how critically important it is to prepare students to find solutions in political and societal “cracks,” to borrow Schultz’s term. By this I mean the crack of compromise that lies between divisive issues. The programs highlighted in this book emphasize pushing a particular belief forward, which is valuable and important, but in today’s social landscape it is also important to understand differing points of view. For example, one student may want to take action to support universal health care for all Americans while another may want to take action to support the repeal of the Affordable Healthcare Act. Currently, there is a lot of activity and advocacy for each side of many political debates, such as health care reform, but our students and the nation as a whole may be better served by finding the common ground, or a crack of compromise, on these critically important issues. It is not my intent to suggest we replace advocacy with compromise; advocacy activities, as described in this text, are essential components to a functioning democracy. What I am suggesting is that our society would benefit from valuing communication and compromise in addition to advocacy activities. On some issues, our country seems divisively split into conflicting advocacy groups, compromise is considered a weakness, and progress is therefore paralyzed.

Again, while the focus of this book was not necessarily societal conflicts, Schultz’s emphasis on democratic education makes them relevant to the book. He does include a few directly political comments such as, “And, unfortunately with the recent appointment of Betsy DeVos . . . we are likely to see more of the same, without wholesale changes to educational policy” (p.17). Therefore one cannot read this book without reflecting on the role of education in our current society. Still, much of the text focuses on tangible examples of excellence in progressive education, ideas, and support for teachers. It does an exceptional job of providing information on progressive education and is a welcome contribution to the field. If the book had deviated into larger social and political issues, it would have distracted from the practical nature and effectiveness of its primary message.

I recommend this book for any progressive minded educator. If your philosophy aligns with the democratic philosophies of Dewey and Freire, then you will find many great examples and ideas that will help bring those values to life. The book is succinct, efficient, and bursting with actionable implementation suggestions. If you are not already a progressively minded educator, then this book may not change your philosophy of education and the examples may seem impractical and too elaborate for your own classroom. Personally, I found the book helpful and inspiring and plan to use some of its resources in my preservice teacher education courses.

### **Author Notes**

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### **References**

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