Peabody Journal of Education

ISSN: 0161-956X (Print) 1532-7930 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hpje20

Civic Education and the Rise of Populist Nationalism

Joel Westheimer

To cite this article: Joel Westheimer (2019) Civic Education and the Rise of Populist Nationalism, Peabody Journal of Education, 94:1, 4-16, DOI: 10.1080/0161956X.2019.1553581

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1553581

Published online: 28 Mar 2019.

PEABODY JOURNAL OF EDUCATION
2019, VOL. 94, NO. 1, 4–16
https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1553581

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Civic Education and the Rise of Populist Nationalism

Joel Westheimer

University of Ottawa

ABSTRACT

Belief in the fundamental importance of civic education for democracy has been long-standing. But if educators can agree that schools have an essential role to play in preparing students for informed engagement in civic and political life, they cannot seem to agree on what that means. The very same efforts that are applauded by some are viewed as misguided by others. The result for schoolchildren has been a mostly watered-down notion of civics that emphasizes good character and patriotism over critical thinking and engaging with multiple perspectives. At the same time, the number of young people worldwide now willing to entertain nondemocratic forms of government is on the rise. For example, nearly a quarter of U.S. youth aged 16 to 24 believe that democracy is a "bad" or "very bad" way of governing. About 70% of millennials do not think it is essential to live in a country governed by democratic rule of law. This article examines the ideological tensions that underlie civic education policies and practice in a time of rising populist support for anti-democratic forms of governance.

"The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen."

—Justice Louis Brandeis

Belief in the fundamental importance of civic education for democracy has been long-standing. Across more than a century of U.S. school reform, and through ideological pendulum swings from a focus on equity to a preoccupation with excellence and back again, the idea that young people must learn to be good citizens has concerned scholars and policy makers alike (Apple, 2018; Dewey, 1916; Educational Policies Commission, 1940; Gutmann, 1987; Noddings, 2015; Parker, 2003; Soder, 1996; Walling, 2004). But if educators can agree that schools have an essential role to play in preparing students for informed engagement in civic and political life, they cannot seem to agree on what that requires. The very same efforts that are applauded by some are viewed as misguided by others. The result for schoolchildren has been a mostly watered-down notion of civics that emphasizes good character and blind patriotism over critical thinking and engaging with multiple perspectives. At the same time, the number of young people worldwide now willing to entertain nondemocratic forms of government is on the rise. For example, nearly a quarter of U.S. youth aged 16 to 24 believe that democracy is a "bad" or "very bad" way of governing and that "choosing leaders through free elections is unimportant" (Foa & Mounk, 2016). About 70% of U.S. millennials do not think it is essential to live in a country governed by democratic rule of law (Foa & Mounk, 2017).

This article examines the ideological tensions (in the United States but also worldwide) that underlie civic education policies and practice in a time of rising populist support for anti-democratic forms of governance. I begin with a personal story to illustrate my own orientation to the importance of a robust form of democratic civic education. I then divide my analysis and discussion into five parts. In the first, I review a framework for surfacing the ideological underpinnings of different visions of the good citizen; second, I discuss the rise of nationalism and its threat to democratic

CONTACT Joel Westheimer joelw@uottawa.ca www.joelwestheimer.org, @joelwestheimer University Research Chair in Democracy and Education, University of Ottawa, 145 Jean-Jacques Lussier, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5, Canada.

governance; third, I place the topic of civic education in the context of current school reform; fourth, I explore essential practices for robust and democratic civic education; and I conclude with a brief word on the influential British report from the Advisory Group on the Teaching of Citizenship and Democracy in schools. Often referred to as "The Crick Report" (political scientist Bernard Crick was chair of the advisory group), it laid out an ambitious agenda for citizenship education that still holds relevance today.

What do I think about when I think about citizenship education?

Both of my parents were born in Germany—my father in Karlsruhe in 1927 and my mother in Frankfurt in 1928. Although my father was displaced by World War II (he moved to Lisbon with his parents and then to Louisville, Kentucky, where he finished high school), my mother was less fortunate. Like my father, she was 10 years old when she left Germany. Unlike my father, she left alone on a *kindertransport* to Heiden, Switzerland (*kindertransports* were organized missions to rescue Jewish children—but not their parents—from Germany and German-occupied territories). It was the last time my mother would see her family.

One of the only times I remember my mother speaking directly, and with great sadness, about this experience was when I was back in Frankfurt with her 40 years later. I was 20 years old. We were waiting for a train together in the Frankfurt *Hauptbahnhof* (central station). She looked at a platform adjacent to the one where we were standing and said, "That's where I waved goodbye to my mother and grandmother. It looks exactly the same." And, indeed, it did. From both photographs and history books, I knew that although the Allied bombing of Frankfurt destroyed much of the city, the central train station suffered only minor damage. Only the advertising looked different. My mother remembers smiling while she waved goodbye so that her mother would not cry. She also remembers giving her favorite doll to the girl seated opposite her, who was disconsolate. They were 2 of the 100 children on the train headed to relative safety in Switzerland.

Although my parents—both German Jewish refugees—spoke little about their experiences during World War II, I suspect that the profound injustices that informed their childhoods have had an indelible impact on my views about education and citizenship in democratic societies. What went wrong in German society that led to such unthinkable events as those that define the Holocaust? How could such a highly educated, mature democracy descend into such unimaginable cruelty and darkness? Historians have suggested a great number of causes, including Germany's punishing defeat in World War I, the suffering German economy after the worldwide Great Depression, and the populist appeal of a leader who promised to fix it all. As an educator, however, I cannot help but wonder what German schools might have done differently. What can we learn from what schools did or did not do in Weimar, Germany (which was a democracy too)? What, if anything, should schools today teach children about civic participation, courage, and dissent? How can schools help young people acquire the essential knowledge, dispositions, and skills for effective democratic citizenship to flourish?

I think about schools not only as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge but also as places where children learn about the society in which they are growing up, how they might engage productively, how they can fight for change when change is warranted, and how to know when that change is warranted. Schools have always taught lessons in citizenship, moral values, good behavior, and "character" (Dewey, 1909; Draper, 1858; Fahey, 1916; Mosier, 1965; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Even before there was formal schooling, informal education was replete with such goals (Heater, 2015; Spring, 2018). Today's schools inevitably teach these lessons as well. For example, schools teach children to follow rules, to wait their turn, and (ideally) to cooperate with others. Schools (again, ideally) teach children how to acquire and process information and how to articulate their ideas to others—all necessary skills for democratic civic participation. Some schools also help students consider whether being a "good" citizen ever requires questioning rules, or what might be the proper balance between rule-following and thinking about the origins and purpose of rules.

History demonstrates that just because schools teach children about citizenship and character does not necessarily mean they do it well or even toward admirable aims. In fact, schools and other youth organizations have sometimes engaged in some of the worst forms of citizenship indoctrination (Noddings, 2002). Counted among the many examples of organized "citizenship" education are the hateful lessons learned by members of the Hitler Youth brigades, who were the same age my mother was when she boarded the train to Switzerland.

There is little need for convincing others that schools should teach citizenship—that schools teach lessons in citizenship is a given regardless of whether the school follows a citizenship education curriculum. How classrooms are set up, who gets to talk when, how adults conduct themselves, how decisions are made, how lessons are enacted—all these inevitably serve as lessons in citizenship. Whether teachers explicitly "teach" lessons in citizenship or not, students learn about community organization, the distribution of power and resources, rights, responsibilities, and of course, justice and injustice (Dewey, 1909; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen 1993; Meier & Gasoi, 2018).

Knowing that schools are always instruments of citizenship education, however, does not eliminate educators' responsibility to interrogate both the implicit and explicit lessons taught. Dewey described schools as miniature communities and noted that the school is not only a preparation for something that comes later but also the place where teachers and students spend most of their waking hours—a community with values and norms embedded in daily experiences (Dewey, 1938). Therefore, when we explore the underlying politics, ideological commitments, and goals of civic education, we are journeying not only into the civics and social studies classroom but into all classrooms, all subjects, the hallways, and the relationships of the entire school experience. In her influential book, *The Way We Argue Now* (2006), literary theorist Amanda Anderson argues that questions about how we should live should be central to literary criticism. I find the same to be true for education. Citizenship education—indeed education of all sorts—is, ultimately, a proxy for the kind of society we seek to create.

When I think about citizenship education, I think about whether we teach children to unquestioningly preserve our social, political, and economic norms and behaviors or to imagine and pursue new and better ones. Do we teach them only the importance of following the rules or also to question when the rules are not worth following? Do we teach students to mobilize in support of policies that promote only their own self-interest or to think more broadly about our ethical obligations to others? I wonder what might have been different in 1941, the year my mother received her last letter from her parents, had children been taught not only compliance but also doubt and the obligation to imagine a better society for all. I think about what civic educators can do now to convey to students the power of community as well as the pitfalls of blind allegiance to it.

What kind of citizens?

A significant body of civic education scholarship is less concerned with whether students should learn citizenship or even how, but rather with the range of goals and ideological assumptions represented (Banks, 2008; Parker, 2003; Ross, 2017; Stitzlein, 2017). It was in that vein of inquiry that colleagues and I began studying programs and policy to better understand "what kind of citizens" practitioners and policy makers were imagining schools might produce and the political implications of resulting program and policy choices (for example, Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Westheimer, 2004; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In study after study, we came to similar conclusions: The kinds of goals and practices commonly represented in curricula that hope to foster democratic citizenship usually have more to do with voluntarism, charity, and obedience than with democracy. In other words, "good citizenship" to many educators means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen—not grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions that every citizen in a democratic society needs to understand.

In our article "What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Education for Democracy," Joseph Kahne and I identify three visions of "good" citizens that help capture the lay of the land when it comes to civic education: the *personally responsible citizen*, the *participatory citizen*, and the *social justice–oriented citizen* (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; see Table 1). *Personally responsible citizens* contribute to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteer to help those less fortunate whether in a soup kitchen or a senior center. They might contribute time, money, or both to charitable causes. Both those in the character education movement and those who advocate community service emphasize this vision of good citizenship. They seek to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work. Or they nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer community service.

Participatory citizens participate in the civic affairs and social life of the community at local, state/provincial, and national levels. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government and other institutions (e.g., community-based organizations, churches) work and about the importance of planning and participating in organized efforts. For example, students may learn to care for those in need or guide school policies. While the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive.

The *social justice–oriented citizen* is an individual who knows how to critically assess multiple perspectives; examine social, political, and economic structures; and explore strategies for change that address root causes of problems. These are critical thinkers, and this vision of citizenship is the least commonly pursued. Programs that encourage this form of citizenship emphasize the ability to think about issues of fairness, equality of opportunity, and democratic engagement. They share with the participatory citizen an emphasis on collective work related to the life and issues of the community. However, they make critical engagement a priority and encourage students to look for ways to improve society and become informed about a variety of complex social issues. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about ways to effect systemic change. If participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food, social justice–oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover to address root causes of hunger (e.g., poverty, inequality, or structural impediments to self-sufficiency). Through an examination of inequities—both historical and extant—programs that emphasize participatory and social justice–oriented visions of the "good" citizen also enable reflection on the ways overlapping and intersecting categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality can constrain and enable social action for the collective benefit of all.

Currently, the vast majority of school programs that take the time to teach citizenship emphasize good character, including the importance of volunteering, helping those in need, and following the law. Character traits such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility for one's actions are certainly valuable for becoming good neighbors and citizens. But, on their own, they have little to do with the unique requirements of citizenship in a democracy. Some programs promote voluntarism and charity as an *alternative* to social policy and organized government action. Former U.S. President George Bush Sr. famously promoted community service activities for youth by imagining a "thousand points of light" representing charitable efforts to respond to those in need. But if young people understand these actions as a kind of *noblesse oblige*—a private act of kindness performed by the privileged—and fail to examine the deeper structural causes of social ills, then the thousand points of light risk becoming a thousand points of the status quo. Citizenship in a democratic community requires kindness and decency, but it also requires significantly more. An overemphasis on kindness might even discourage challenges to the status quo so as not to ruffle feathers.

Citizenship education that teaches students to follow the rules, listen to their teachers, be honest, help others in need, clean up after themselves, try their best, and be team players is rarely controversial since few would find these goals inherently wrong. But those lessons would be just as welcome in North Korea, Uzbekistan, and Belarus—countries the organization Freedom House

Table 1. What kind of citizen?

	Three Kinds of Citizens		
	Personally Responsible Citizen	Participatory Citizen	Social Justice–Oriented Citizen
Description	Acts responsibly in the community Works and pays taxes Picks up litter, recycles, and gives blood Helps those in need, lends a hand during times of crisis Obeys laws	Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment Knows how government agencies work Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks	Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures Explores strategies for change that address root causes of problems Knows about social movements and how to effect systemic change Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice
Sample action	Contributes food to a food drive	Helps to organize a food drive	Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes
Core assumptions	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question and change established systems and structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time

Westheimer, *What Kind of Citizen? Educating Our Children for the Common Good* (Teachers College Press, 2015b).

(2017) identifies as among the least democratic and free in the world. Respect for teachers and government leaders, loyalty, kindness, and diligence may all be important. But they are important under any organized system of government—totalitarian dictatorships, military dictatorships, monarchies, religious theocracies, and oligarchies. Think of even the most benevolent dictator, one who makes decisions only with the best interests of the people in mind. That leader would still not desire citizens to consider perspectives other than the one that he or she has decided is the best way forward. Democracies, however, make special demands on their citizens. Government of the people, by the people, and for the people requires the people to participate in decisions about laws and policies that affect us all. It follows, then, that schools in democratic nations have special requirements as well.

Diminishing democracy and the rise of nationalism

The kind of robust civic education that asks students to imagine a more just society offers students multiple perspectives on controversial issues and teaches them that critical engagement has always been a desirable goal for any democratic nation (see also Gadsden et al. in this issue). But the current toxic mix of ideological polarization, waning trust in government, and a breakdown in the traditions and institutions that enable democratic governance make these goals seem even more critical. In a widely circulated 2017 report, the Pew Research Center raised considerable alarm among those who have generally assumed that Western democracies enjoy relative stability amidst an entrenched culture of democratic governance (Wike, Simmons, Stokes, & Fetterolf, 2017). Although the report was titled "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy," commentators, civic educators, and political scientists highlighted a number of findings that challenged the rosier title. In the United States, for example, 22% of respondents thought that a political system in which a strong leader could make decisions without interference from congress or the courts would be a good way of governing. Close to one in three respondents who identified as Republican and almost half of U.S. millennials thought the same (globally, that figure was 26%).

In another study released a few months earlier, Harvard lecturer Yascha Mounk and Australian political scientist Roberto Stefan Foa examined longitudinal data from the World Values Survey and found considerable cause for concern. Between 1995 and 2014, the number of citizens who reported a preference for a government leader who was "strong" and who did not need to bother with elections increased in almost every developed and developing democracy and, again, the growth was greatest among youth and young adults (Foa & Mounk, 2016). Democracy, it seems, is not self-winding.

The 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the Brexit vote of the same year served to deepen fears that populist nationalism—the rallying in the service of right-wing nationalism of "the people" against the common enemy of both "foreigners" and a constructed "elite"—is gaining ground in the United States and globally. Since taking office, President Trump has openly expressed disdain for hallmarks of democratic society, including the free press, civil liberties, and the courts. He has also encouraged discourse, policy, and legislation that seeks to severely restrict both immigration (Vidal, 2018) and global trade (Lester & Manak, 2018) while fostering resentment against ethnic "others" among his base (Bonikowski, 2017). These anti-democratic rhetoric and policies can drive individuals and groups to withdraw from the broader civil society altogether, preferring subgroup identity over attachments to the broader civil society—what James Banks (2017) aptly calls "failed citizenship."

Moreover, a rise in xenophobia and a global revival of jingoistic nationalism has resulted in incidents of hate speech, antagonism, and assaults on both newly arrived immigrants and native-born visible minorities in a growing number of Western democracies (United Nations, 2016). In the United States, the Southern Poverty Law Center has documented a precipitous rise in hatred, fear, and alienation among students (Costello, 2016). Teachers have similarly reported a dramatic increase in hate speech (Au, 2017; Rogers et al., 2017; Vara-Orta, 2018). Social media echo chambers further

entrench anti-democratic tendencies and pollute genuine social and political discourse (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Middaugh, this issue). Yoichi Funabashi, chairman of the Rebuild Japan Initiative, which is dedicated to strengthening democratic ideals in Japan, summarizes the risks of these divisions succinctly: "If society becomes characterized by intolerant divisions, in which people immediately select their allies and dismiss others as foes based on such criteria as race, ethnicity, religion or lifestyle, then democracy's foundational principles, rooted in careful deliberation and compromise, will be rendered inoperable" (Funabashi, 2017). Ultimately, as witnessed most recently in the murder of 32-year-old Heather Heyer during a neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting that killed 11 people, the attempted pipe bomb murders of prominent political and philanthropic leaders throughout the United States, and dozens of other incidents, the result is a threat not only to democracy but also to life and liberty (see Hasan, 2018 for a disturbing review of recent deaths directly linked to political hate speech).

Against this sociopolitical backdrop, I would like to think that education policy makers across the globe would respond with urgency and clarity of purpose. But if being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social assumptions, then that foundation of citizenship is at odds with recent trends in education policy.

The school reform context

The challenges to social cohesion and democratic community highlight the need for a robust form of civic education. In what could be considered initially reassuring, almost every school mission statement boasts broad goals related to critical thinking, global citizenship, environmental stewardship, and moral character. Yet mission statements and school policy and practice do not always align. In many school districts, ever more narrow curriculum frameworks emphasize preparing students for standardized assessments in math and literacy at the same time that they shortchange the social studies, history, and even the most basic citizenship education (Au, 2007; Koretz, 2017). Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg calls the kind of school reform that elevates testing and standardization above all other educational considerations GERM (for Global Education Reform Movement). He describes GERM as follows:

> It is like an epidemic that spreads and infects education systems through a virus. It travels with pundits, media [,] and politicians. Education systems borrow policies from others and get infected. As a consequence, schools get ill, teachers don't feel well, and kids learn less. (Sahlberg, 2012)

Not only do kids learn less, but what they learn tends to follow prescriptive formulas that match the standardized tests. In the process, more complex and difficult-to-measure learning outcomes get left behind. These include creativity and emotional and social development but also the kinds of thinking skills associated with robust civic engagement. Teachers' ability to teach critical thinking and students' ability to think and act critically are diminished.

The arguably more well-intentioned but still problematic Common Core State Standards Initiative, while aimed at increasing critical thinking, has nonetheless continued the myopic focus on testing (Karp, 2013/2014). Developed in 2009 and 2010 under the auspices of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core State Standards have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia (the widespread participation is due, in part, to the stipulation that in order to be eligible for Race to the Top funding, states must first adopt the new standards). Although many educators agree that the content of the newer standards has more depth than previous attempts at standardized rubrics, the uniformity they demand continues to inhibit the possibilities of using localized knowledge (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016; Meier & Gasoi, 2018). Moreover, the new standards, much like the old ones, are inextricably linked to the larger political project to remake (some would say destroy) public education—a package of reforms that include high-stakes testing, teacher evaluations, "value-added" measures, and privatization. As David Greene argued in *U.S. News and World Report* (2014), we must always

evaluate standards in the context of a larger policy context that stifles teachers. Uniformity, Greene notes, means that teachers' practical wisdom and spontaneity are devalued. Curricular approaches that spoon-feed students to succeed on narrow academic tests teach students that broader critical thinking is optional (see Brezicha & Mitra in this issue).

It is worth noting that, although the overall reform context may limit in-depth, critical analysis, a significant number of teachers continue to teach those skills. As the important work of Kahne and Middaugh (2008) has demonstrated, however, it tends to be higher-achieving students, often from wealthier neighborhoods, who are receiving a disproportionate share of the kinds of citizenship education that sharpen students' thinking about issues of public debate and concern. This demographic divide or "civic opportunity gap" results in unequal distribution of opportunities to practice democratic engagement. Since economic inequality (and inequitable school funding) has also increased dramatically over the past decade, these effects are likely to get worse before they get better unless civic educators directly address the disparity (Barshay, 2015; Saez, 2016).

The increasingly narrow curriculum goals, accountability measures, and standardized testing I describe above (and detailed in Wilson et al. in this issue) have reduced too many classroom lessons to the cold, stark pursuit of information and facts without context and social meaning. It is not that facts are bad or that they should be ignored. But democratic societies require more than citizens who are fact-full. They require citizens who can think and act in ethically thoughtful ways. A well-functioning democracy benefits from classroom practices that teach students to recognize ambiguity and conflict in factual content, to see human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and to embrace debate and deliberation as a cornerstone of democratic societies.

Democratic civic education

Public schooling in America has always been implicated in nurturing civic capacities and habits consistent with democratic life. Research on extant democratic civic education practices read alongside theoretical contributions on the prerequisites for robust democratic engagement offer a wealth of material on which to build (for example, Banks, 2008; Journell, 2017; Noddings, 2015; Parker, 2003, 2014). In the remaining space, I would like to highlight three characteristics of the highest-quality democratic civic education programs that I find essential for teaching democratic habits of heart and mind: Teach students how to ask questions, expose students to multiple perspectives, and root instruction in local contexts.

Teach students to question

One hallmark of a totalitarian society is the notion of one single "truth" handed down from a leader or small group of leaders to everyone else. Questioning that truth is not only discouraged but also often illegal. By contrast, schools in democratic societies must teach students how to ask challenging questions—the kind of uncomfortable queries that challenge tradition (Giroux, 2017). Although most of us would agree that traditions are important, without questioning there can be no progress. Dissent—feared and suppressed in nondemocratic societies—is the engine of progress in free ones. Education reformers, school leaders, and parents should do everything possible to ensure that teachers and students have opportunities to ask these kinds of questions.

For example, Bob Peterson, a one-time Wisconsin Elementary Teacher of the Year, worked with his students at La Escuela Fratney in Madison to examine the full spectrum of ideological positions that emerged following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Instead of avoiding his fifth-grade students' challenging questions, Peterson encouraged them. He placed a notebook prominently at the front of the classroom labeled "Questions That We Have." As the students discussed their questions and the unfolding current events, Peterson repeatedly asked students to consider their responsibilities to one another, to their communities, and to the world (Westheimer, 2015a).

Expose students to multiple perspectives

Much as Darwin's theory of natural selection depends on genetic variation, any theory of teaching in a democratic society depends on encouraging a multiplicity of ideas, perspectives, and approaches to exploring solutions to issues of widespread concern. Students need practice in entertaining multiple viewpoints on issues that affect their lives (Bruen et al., 2016; Campbell, 2008; Lin, Lawrence, & Snow, 2015). These issues might be controversial. But improving society requires embracing that kind of controversy so citizens can engage in democratic dialog and work together toward understanding and enacting sensible policies.

Why would we expect adults, even senators or members of Congress, to be able to intelligently and compassionately discuss different viewpoints in the best interests of their constituents if schoolchildren never or rarely get that opportunity? In schools that further democratic aims, teachers engage young people in deep historical, political, social, economic, and even scientific analysis. They also challenge children to imagine how their lived experiences are not universal and how issues that may seem trivial to them could matter deeply to others. They have students examine multiple perspectives not only to know that their (or their parents') views may not be shared by everyone but also to engender a kind of critical empathy for those with competing needs. This is the kind of teaching that encourages future citizens to leverage their civic skills for the greater social good, rather than their own particular interests, thus working to challenge social inequities.

How should we do this? For example, teachers might present newspaper articles from around the world (easily accessed through the Internet) that examine the same event. Which facts and narratives are consistent? Which are different? Why? Textbooks from several different countries could provide another trove of lessons on multiple viewpoints and the role of argument and evidence in democratic deliberation. If such textbooks are not available in English, there is plenty of variation in perspectives across English-language textbooks; for instance, schools in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States present strikingly different perspectives on the War of 1812.

Why not ask students to research who wrote their textbook? Was it one person or a committee? Why were those people chosen? What kind of author was *not* invited to participate? The idea that a person or group actually *wrote* a textbook reminds us that the words are not sacrosanct but represent the views of a particular time, place, and group of authors. These approaches help demonstrate to students that "facts" are less stable than is often thought.

Focus on the here and now

Schools should encourage students to consider their specific surroundings and circumstances. It is not possible to teach democratic forms of thinking without providing an environment to think about. For that reason, among many others, nationally standardized tests are difficult to reconcile with in-depth critical thinking about issues that matter to students in a particular time and place. For example, students are frequently exposed to past historical controversies—such as slavery, Nazism, or laws denying voting rights to women—that are already settled in the minds of all but a small fringe minority. But those same students are too often shielded from matters that require thoughtful engagement with *today's* competing ideas (e.g., abortion rights; universal daycare; maintaining, changing, or removing monuments to controversial historical figures). Yet that kind of engagement is exactly what democratic participation requires.

One way to provide experiences with democratic participation in civic and political life is to engage students in contemporary and community-based projects that encourage the development of personal responsibility, participation, and critical analysis. Service-learning programs (Evans, 2015; Kahne & Westheimer, 2001), when they embrace the full set of those outcomes, can foster the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the democratically engaged citizen. Similarly, recent work on action civics is a particularly powerful and thoughtful way to foster civic participation that transcends community service to also include a focus on government, policy, and dissent (Blevins, LeCompte, & Wells, 2016;

Levinson, 2014). We saw this with the students of Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, who, in responding to a local event—a shooting in their school and the death of their friends—became key figures in a national dialog on gun culture in the Unites States, while also mobilizing both locally and nationally to agitate for gun control legislation, organize demonstrations, support electoral candidates, and register voters. Their ability to connect a very personal experience with the ways in which government, policy, and the gun lobby shape their lives has allowed them to make real change on a national scale and no doubt prepared them for a life of effective civic engagement. When students have the opportunity to engage with civics education through direct action in their own local context, the impacts of their work are integrated with their lived experience and can teach fundamental lessons about the power of citizen engagement (Facing History and Ourselves, 2018; Obama, 2018).

Of course, choosing to be explicitly political in the classroom can cause friction for teachers—with students, parents, and administrators. Teachers have been disciplined, suspended, and fired for engaging students in discussions on controversial issues (Journell, 2017; Stitzlein, 2013; Westheimer, 2007). Even when teachers avoid expressing their own political views, encouraging discussion, controversy, and action in the classroom can be daunting (see also Gibbs in this issue). Students may express views that make classmates uncomfortable, they may engage in political acts that concern their parents, or they may choose to challenge their own school's policies. Democracy can be messy. Rather than let fear of sanction and censorship dictate pedagogical choices, however, teachers should feel supported and protected, encouraged to use debates and controversy as "teachable moments" in civic discourse.

Conclusion

Two decades ago, the British government commissioned a report by a citizenship advisory group led by political theorist Bernard Crick. This document laid out goals that continue to serve as a valuable blueprint for schools today:

> We aim … for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able, and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves. (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998)

In 2018, when some of the world's oldest democracies are threatened by vast economic inequality, fear, xenophobia, attacks on a free press, and a potentially dangerous form of populism, teaching and learning that helps young people understand and respond to these phenomena are essential. It is incumbent on teachers and school leaders to reassert a role in fostering schools that reclaim the importance of democratic values and the common good and that strengthen the bonds between us. The good news is that while some policy makers have been myopically preoccupied with standardized testing in only two subject areas (math and literacy) and others have passed laws effectively outlawing critical thinking (see Strauss, 2012; Westheimer, 2015a), teachers and students have often created their own lessons in civic engagement. In every school district there are examples of individual teachers and schools that work creatively and diligently to engage their students in thinking about the ways their education connects to broader democratic goals. Curriculum that teaches critical analysis of multiple perspectives on a huge variety of topics is available from a variety of organizations (e.g., *Rethinking Schools, Teaching for Change*, the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Teaching for Tolerance*, and the *Zinn Education Project*) and a significant number of teachers are using these resources with their students.

Some lessons also derive from spontaneous grassroots engagement. For example, in 2014 more than 1,000 Jefferson County, Colorado, high school students and hundreds of teachers walked out of classes to protest changes in the Advanced Placement (AP) history curriculum that sought to downplay the legacy of civil disobedience and protest in American history while promoting patriotism, respect for authority, and the benefits of the free enterprise system. One high school senior,

noting that students were protesting a curriculum that discourages protesting, quipped, "If they don't teach us [about] civil disobedience, we will teach ourselves" (Jacobs, 2014).

If today's youth are to participate in political decision making, schools must ensure that they are sufficiently well-informed to do so effectively. Basic skills like literacy and numeracy are, perhaps, the first important step toward that goal—but they are not enough. Education that fosters the kind of engagement a well-functioning democracy requires will also ensure that students gain the knowledge, capacities, and dispositions associated with a robust democratic life.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Karen Suurtamm for invaluable assistance with research for this article; Barbara Leckie for her thoughtful and critical suggestions; and Lora Cohen-Vogel, Jerry Wilson, James Sadler, Michele Thompson, Francisco Santelli, and two anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback and for raising especially helpful questions.

Author bio

Joel Westheimer is University Research Chair in Democracy and Education at the University of Ottawa and education columnist for CBC Radio. His newest critically acclaimed book is *What Kind of Citizen: Educating Our Children for the Common Good*. He is principal investigator (with John Rogers, UCLA) of *The Inequality Project*, investigating what schools in North America are teaching about economic inequality (www.theinequalityproject.org). In addition to researching the role of schools in democratic societies, Westheimer also studies, writes, and speaks widely on global school reform, the standards and accountability onslaught, and the politics of education and education research. You can follow him on Twitter @joelwestheimer, visit his website at www.joelwestheimer.org, or email him at joelw@uottawa.ca.

ORCID

Joel Westheimer http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1111-1956

References

Anderson, A. (2006). *The way we argue now: A study in the cultures of theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Apple, M. (2018). *The struggle for democracy in education: Lessons from social realities*. New York: Routledge.

Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, *36*(5), 258–267. [CrossRef][10.3102/0013189X07306523]

Au, W. (2017). When multicultural education is not enough. *Multicultural Perspectives*, *19*(3), 147–150. [CrossRef][10.1080/15210960.2017.1331741]

Banks, J. A. (2008). Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. *Educational Researcher*, *37*(3), 129–139. [CrossRef][10.3102/0013189X08317501]

Banks, J. A. (2017). Failed citizenship and transformative civic education. *Educational Researcher*, *46*(7), 366–377. [CrossRef][10.3102/0013189X17726741]

Barshay, J. (2015). The gap between rich and poor schools grew 44 percent over a decade. The Hechinger Report. https://hechingerreport.org/the-gap-between-rich-and-poor-schools-grew-44-percent-over-a-decade.

Blankstein, A. M., & Noguera, P. (2016). *Excellence through equity: Five principles of courageous leadership to guide achievement for every student*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

Blevins, B., LeCompte, K., & Wells, S. (2016). Innovations in civic education: developing civic agency through action civics. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *44*(3), 344–384. [CrossRef][10.1080/00933104.2016.1203853]

Bonikowski, B. (2017). Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *68*(S1), S182–S213.

Brezicha, K., & Mitra, D. (2019). Putting civics to the test: Emphasizing agency and belonging in students' civic development. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *94*(1)

Bruen, J., Crosbie, V., Kelly, N., Loftus, M., Maillot, A., McGillicuddy, A., & Péchenart, J. (2016). Teaching controversial topics in the humanities and social sciences in Ireland: Using structured academic controversy to develop multi-perspectivity in the learner. *Journal of Social Science Education*, *15*(3), 18–25.

Campbell, D. (2008). Voice in the classroom: how an open classroom fosters political engagement among adolescents. *Political Behavior*, *30*(4), 437–454. [CrossRef][10.1007/s11109-008-9063-z]

Costello, M. (2016). *The Trump effect: The impact of the presidential campaign on our nation's schools*. Montgomery, AL: The Southern Poverty Law Center. Available at: www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/splc_the_trump_effect.pdf
Dewey, J. (1909/1975). *Moral principles in education*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: The MacMillan Company.
Dewey, J. (1938/1980). *Experience and education*. Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press.
Draper, L. C. (1858). Moral and religious instruction in public schools. May 31, 1858 letter to a member of the Board of Education of Watertown reprinted in Draper, L. C. *The tenth annual report on the condition and improvement of the common schools and educational interests of the state of Wisconsin for the year 1858*. Madison, WI: Artwood and Rublee. pp. 229–244. Available at www.books.google.ca/books?id=Q0UTAAAAIAAJ.
Educational Policies Commission (1940). Education and the Defense of American Democracy. Washington, DC: National Education Association of the United States, and the American Association of School Administrators.
Evans, H. (2015). Service-learning and political engagement, efficacy, and apathy: A case study at Sam Houston State University. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, *10*(2), 107–117. [CrossRef][10.1177/1746197915583940]
Facing History and Ourselves. (2018). *After Parkland, students choose to participate*. www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/after-parkland-students-choose-participate.
Fahey, S. H. (1916). Moral education: What the schools can do. In *National Education Association Journal of Addresses and Proceedings 1916*. Ann Arbor, MI: The Association.
Foa, R. S., & Mounk, Y. (2016). The danger of deconsolidation: The democratic disconnect. *Journal of Democracy*, *27* (3), 5–17. [CrossRef][10.1353/jod.2016.0049][Mismatch]
Foa, R. S., & Mounk, Y. (2017). Yes, people really are turning away from democracy. The Washington Post. Available at: www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/12/08/yes-millennials-really-are-surprisingly-approving-of-dictators/.
Freedom House. (2017). *Freedom in the world 2017*. New York: Freedom House.
Funabashi, Y. (2017, January 17). Trump's populist nationalism. The Japan Times. www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/01/17/commentary/japan-commentary/trumps-populist-nationalism/.
Gadsden, V. L., Foxworth Johnson, W., & Rahman, S. (2019). Student civic engagement, civic participation, and schooling. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *94*(1).
Gibbs, B. (2019). Patriotism, pressure and place: Civic agency in base country. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *94*(1)
Giroux, H. A. (2017). The scourge of illiteracy in authoritarian times. *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice*, *9*(1), 14–27.
Greene, D. (2014, March 17). The Long Death of Creative Teaching: Common Core standards are part of a bigger movement towards stifling teachers. U.S. News & World Report. www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2014/03/17/how-common-core-standards-kill-creative-teaching.
Gutmann, A. (1987). *Democratic education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Hasan, M. (2018). Here is a list of far-right attackers Trump inspired: Cesar Sayoc wasn't the first — and won't be the last. The Intercept. https://theintercept.com/2018/10/27/here-is-a-list-of-far-right-attackers-trump-inspired-cesar-sayoc-wasnt-the-first-and-wont-be-the-last/.
Heater, D. (2015). *A history of education for citizenship*. New York: Routledge.
Jackson, P., Boostrom, R. E., & Hansen, D. T. (1993). *The moral life of schools*. New York: Jossey-Bass.
Jacobs, P. (2014, September 26). Colorado high school students are protesting a proposed curriculum they say censors US history. Business Insider. Available at: www.businessinsider.com/colorado-students-protest-curriculum-changes-2014-9.
Journell, W. (2017). *Teaching politics in secondary education: Engaging with contentious issues*. New Paltz, NY: State University of New York Press.
Kahne, J., & Bowyer, B. (2017). Educating for democracy in a partisan age: Confronting the challenges of motivated reasoning and misinformation. *American Educational Research Journal*, *54*(1), 3–34. [CrossRef][10.3102/0002831216679817][Mismatch]
Kahne, J., & Westheimer, J. (2001). Social justice, service learning, and higher education: a critical review of research. *School Field*, *7*(5–6), 31–42.
Kahne, J., & Westheimer, J. (2006). The limits of efficacy: Educating citizens for a democratic society. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *39*(2), 289–296. [CrossRef][10.1017/S1049096506060471]
Kahne, J., & Middaugh, E. (2008). *Democracy for some: The civic opportunity gap in high school (Working Paper #59)*. Washington, DC: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning (CIRCLE).
Karp, S. (2013/2014). The problems with the common core. *Rethinking Schools*, *28*(2). www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/the-problems-with-the-common-core.
Koretz, D. (2017). *The testing charade: Pretending to make schools better*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Lester, S., & Manak, I. (2018). The rise of populist nationalism and the renegotiation of NAFTA. *Journal of International Economic Law*, *21*(1), 151–169. [CrossRef][10.1093/jiel/jgy005]
Levinson, M. (2014). *No citizen left behind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Lin, A. R., Lawrence, J. F., & Snow, C. E. (2015). Teaching urban youth about controversial issues: pathways to becoming active and informed citizens. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, *14*(2), 103–119. [CrossRef][10.1177/2047173415600606]

Middaugh, E. (2019). More than just facts: Promoting civic information literacy in the era of outrage. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *94*(1)
Meier, D., & Gasoi, E. (2018). *These schools belong to you and me: Why we can't afford to abandon our public schools*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
Mosier, R. (1965). *Making the American mind: Social and moral ideas in the McGuffey Readers*. New York, NY: Russell & Russell.
Noddings, N. (2002). *Educating Moral People: A caring alternative to character education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Noddings, N. (2015). *Education and democracy in the 21st century*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Obama, B. (2018). The 100 most influential people of 2018: Parkland students. Time Magazine. http://time.com/collection/most-influential-people-2018/5217568/parkland-students/.
Parker, W. C. (2003). *Teaching democracy: Unity and diversity in public life*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
Parker, W. C. (2014). Citizenship education in the United States: Regime type, foundational questions, and classroom practice. Chapter 20. In L. Nucci, D. Narvaez, & T. Krettenauer (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (2nd ed., pp. 347–367). New York, NY: Routledge.
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. (1998). *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools*. London: GB.
Rogers, J., Franke, M. Y., J. E., Ishimoto, M., Diera, C., Geller, R., Berryman, A., & Brenes, T. (2017). *Teaching and learning in the age of Trump: Increasing stress and hostility in America's high schools*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.
Ross, E. W. (2017). *Rethinking social studies: Critical pedagogy in pursuit of dangerous citizenship*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
Saez, E. (2016). Striking it richer: The evolution of top incomes in the United States (updated with 2015 estimates). https://eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-UStopincomes-2015.pdf
Sahlberg, P. (2012, June 29). How GERM is infecting schools around the world. The Washington Post, [blog: The Answer Sheet web log by Valerie Strauss]. Available at: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/how-germ-is-infecting-schools-around-the-world/2012/06/29/gJQAVELZAW_blog.html.
Soder, R. (1996). *Democracy, education, and the schools*. New York: Jossey-Bass.
Spring, J. (2018). *The American school: From the Puritans to the Trump era*. New York, NY: Routledge.
Stitzlein, S. M. (2013). *Teaching for dissent: Citizenship education and political activism*. New York: Routledge.
Stitzlein, S. M. (2017). *American public education and the responsibility of its citizens: Supporting democracy in the age of accountability*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
Strauss, V. (2012, July 9). Texas GOP rejects 'critical thinking' skills. Really. The Washington Post. Available at: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/texas-gop-rejects-critical-thinking-skills-really/2012/07/08/gJQAHNpFXW_blog.html.
Tyack, D., & Hansot, E. (1982). *Managers of virtue: Public school leadership in America, 1820-1980*. New York: Basic Books. [CrossRef][10.1086/ahr/89.2.531]
United Nations. (2016). *Racism, xenophobia increasing globally, experts tell Third Committee, amid calls for laws to combat hate speech, concerns over freedom of expression*. Available at: www.un.org/press/en/2016/gashc4182.doc.htm.
Vara-Orta, F. (2018). *Hate in schools*. Washington, D.C.: Editorial Projects in Education Inc.
Vidal, X. M. (2018). Immigration politics in the 2016 election. *Political Science & Politics*, *51*(2), 304–308.
Walling, D. R. (2004). *Public education, democracy, and the common good*. Washington, D.C.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
Westheimer, J. (2004). The politics of civic education. *Political Science & Politics*, *38*(2), 57–61.
Westheimer, J. (2007). *Pledging allegiance: The politics of teaching about patriotism in America's classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Westheimer, J. (2015a). No child left thinking. *Colleagues, 12*(1), Article 14. Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol12/iss1/14.
Westheimer, J. (2015b). *What kind of citizen: Educating our children for the common good*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *41*(2), 237–269. [CrossRef][10.3102/00028312041002237]
Wike, R., Simmons, K., Stokes, B., & Fetterolf, J. (2017). *Globally, broad support for representative and direct democracy: But many also endorse nondemocratic alternatives*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.
Wilson, J., Sadler, J., Cohen-Vogel, N., & Willis, C. (2019). The role of the state: Changes in civic education requirements, 1999-2016. *Peabody Journal of Education, 94* (1)