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CAN EDUCATION TRANSFORM THE WORLD?

by Joel Westheimer

Abstract
The author discusses what it means to be a "good" citizen in a democracy, whether schools are teaching children to be good citizens, and ways to implement citizenship education in schools.
Key words: *citizenship education, civic education, democratic citizens*

> To refuse to face the task of creating a vision of a future . . . immeasurably more just and noble and beautiful than . . . today is to evade the most crucial, difficult, and important educational task.
>
> –George S. Counts (1932)

Citizenship education is not a new idea. Spanning more than a century of school reform around the world—and through ideological pendulum swings from a focus on equity to a preoccupation with excellence and back again—schools have taught lessons in moral values, good behavior, and character (Dewey, 1909/1975; Draper, 1858; Fahey, 1916; Mosier, 1965; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Even before there was formal schooling, informal education embraced such goals (Heater, 2015; Spring, 2018). Today's schools are similar in this regard. For most people I know, the aims of schooling go well beyond mastery of a few academic subjects. Parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers often share the idea that young people must learn to be good people, respectful of others and of their communities.

Although there is a great deal of rhetorical agreement with the idea that schools should teach children to be good citizens, the ways schools should pursue such a goal is much less clear. In fact, the nature of the goal itself is a matter of debate. Is a good citizen one who is polite and follows the rules? Do good citizens participate in their communities? Do they protest unjust laws, vote, run for political office? In what follows, I reflect on the role of schools in teaching students to be democratic citizens. Although citizenship education is the focus, along the way, you'll get a good sense of why I think it is important for educators across the disciplines to think about schools as places where children learn not only to read and write and add numbers, but also to think about the society in which we live and imagine the kind of society that they can help create.

A Personal Story

This topic was on my mind recently, when I stood in the Frankfurt *Hauptbahnhof* station waiting for a train to Prague. Both of my parents were born in Germany, my father in Karlsruhe in 1927 and my mother in Frankfurt in 1928. My father was displaced by World War II (he moved to Lisbon with his parents and then to Louisville, Kentucky); my mother was less fortunate. Like my father, she left Germany before being sent to a work camp, or concentration camp. Unlike my father, she left her hometown without her parents on a *kindertransport* to Heiden, Switzerland.

As I waited for my train, I realized that 80 years ago, my mother had stood in this same train station and waved goodbye to her mother and grandmother, who ran next to the train as it left the station. She remembers smiling so that her mother would not be sad. She also remembers giving her favorite doll to the girl seated opposite her, who was disconsolate. They were two of 100 children on the train headed to relative safety in Switzerland. It was the last time my mother would see her family. She was 10 years old.

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.

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> A toxic mix of rising economic inequality and ideological polarization is increasing, leading to waning trust in democratic governance.
>
> —JOEL WESTHEIMER

As an educator, however, I can't help but wonder what German schools might have done differently before Adolf Hitler's rise to power (after all, prior to the Nazi dictatorship from 1933 to 1945, Germany was a democracy). 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?

Democratic Citizenship Education

I do not mean to imply that another holocaust is imminent or that there is some kind of equivalency between antidemocratic leaders today and Hitler. I use this example both because it has personal resonance given my family history and because extreme examples have a way of making concerning developments and trends visible. Currently, notably in the United States but also in many other countries, a toxic mix of rising economic inequality and ideological polarization is increasing, leading to waning trust in democratic governance.

Eighty-seven years after Germany's democracy was replaced by a totalitarian Nazi regime, popular support for democratic governance is the lowest it has been in decades. In a widely circulated 2017 report, the Pew Research Center raised considerable alarm among those who had assumed that western democracies enjoy relative stability within an entrenched culture of democratic governance (Wike, Simmons, Stokes, & Fetterolf, 2017). In the United States, for example, 22% of respondents to the Pew survey 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, 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 (Mounk & Foa, 2016). 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 has increased in almost every developed and developing democracy; and, again, the growth has been greatest among youth and young adults. Neither Canada (where I currently live) nor the United States are exceptions. Democracy, it seems, is not self-winding.

Concrete examples now abound of leaders stoking the flames of populist nationalism—the rallying of "the people" against both "foreigners" and "elites" in the service of right-wing nationalism. Worldwide, politicians can now openly express disdain for hallmarks of democratic society, including the free press, civil liberties, and the courts, while fostering resentment against foreigners and ethnic "others." These kinds of antidemocratic rhetoric and policies can drive individuals and groups to withdraw from the broader civil society altogether, preferring subgroup identity—what James Banks (2017) aptly called "failed citizenship."

What Kind of Citizens?

If we are to take seriously commitments to teaching democratic citizenship, then our school curricula should reflect these concerns. And yet research that colleagues and I have conducted over the past 2 decades suggests that schools do not always accomplish that goal. For example, Joseph Kahne and I collected data from a dozen U.S. school-based programs that sought to teach children to be good citizens (Westheimer, 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and found that not all programs pursued visions of citizenship that were necessarily democratic. That research continued with many other studies in both Canada and the United States of hundreds of K–16 programs, the results of which are reflected in a typology that we created of three types, or visions, of the "good" citizen. I discuss these in detail in my recent book, *What Kind of Citizen? Educating Our Children for the Common Good* (Westheimer, 2015), but I share an abbreviated version of our findings here. We called the three visions of a "good" citizen (a) The Personally Responsible

Citizen, (b) the Participatory Citizen, and (c) the Social Justice–Oriented Citizen (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 take part in the civic affairs and social life of the community at local, state/provincial, national, and sometimes global levels. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government works and, in democratic countries, the importance of voting. These programs also highlight the role of other institutions (e.g., community-based organizations, churches) and encourage students to plan and participate in organized efforts to care for those in need. While the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive.

Social justice–oriented citizens know 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. Educational programs that encourage this

Table 1. *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	Participates as an active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts Organizes community efforts to accomplish community tasks such as caring for those in need, promoting economic development, or reducing environmental waste 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.

form of citizenship emphasize the ability to think about issues of fairness, equality of opportunity, and equality of political representation (some of the very issues highlighted by a human rights agenda). Social justice–oriented citizens share with participatory citizens an emphasis on collective work related to the life and needs of the community. However, the programs that pursue this vision of the good citizen make critical engagement a priority and encourage students to become informed about a variety of complex social issues and look for ways to improve society. 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 and lasting 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, structural impediments to self-sufficiency).

Personal Responsibility Is Not Enough

Studies by scholars in a broad variety of geographical, political, economic, and social contexts come to similar conclusions: The kinds of goals and practices commonly represented in citizenship education programs usually have more to do with volunteering, charity, and obedience (personally responsible citizenship) than with social action, social change, or social justice (participatory and social justice–oriented citizenship). In other words, good citizenship—to many educators and policymakers—means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping at a soup kitchen, rather than grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions needed to address the root causes of injustice.

Many school-based programs that take the time to teach citizenship or social values are the kind that emphasize either good character—including the importance of helping those in need—or technical knowledge of legislatures and how government works. Far less common are school programs that teach students to think about root causes of problems or challenge existing social, economic, and political norms as a way of improving society and pursuing democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and social justice. Democratic citizenship requires more than personal responsibility.

Education that teaches students to follow the rules, obey authority figures, be honest, help others in need, clean up after themselves, try their best, and be team players is rarely controversial. But without an analysis of power, politics, and one's role in local and global political and economic structures, students are unlikely to become effective citizens who can work with others toward improving the world. Teaching not just citizenship but democratic citizenship specifically requires that students learn to think critically, ask questions about the world around them, and engage with multiple ways of seeing and perceiving.

What is the proper balance between rule following and thinking about the origins and purpose of those rules? One can imagine classrooms that aspire to that balance. But just because schools teach children about citizenship and character doesn't mean they always do it well or even lead toward admirable aims. In fact, sometimes schools and other youth organizations have been enlisted in some of the worst forms of citizenship indoctrination. 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 as my mother when she boarded the train to Switzerland.

What Kind of Civic Education?

We need citizens who can think and act in ethically thoughtful ways. A well-functioning democratic society 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. Following are five strategies that can help shape educational practices in an era of both increasing global interconnections and decreasing support for social democracy.

Teach students to ask questions. 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. 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.

Expose students to multiple perspectives. 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. These issues might be controversial. But improving society requires embracing that kind of controversy so citizens can engage in democratic dialogue and work together toward understanding and enacting sensible policies. Teachers might present newspaper articles from around the world 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. Many of these textbooks are now accessible online, allowing the kinds of comparisons that would have been difficult before the advent of communications technology. If textbooks are not available online, teachers can use the power of social media to connect with classes in other countries whose students are reading different textbooks.

In schools that further democratic aims, teachers engage young people in deep historical, political, social, economic, and even scientific analysis. They also challenge students to imagine how their lived experiences are not universal and how issues that may seem trivial to them could matter deeply to others. These teachers 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 in a globalized world that encourages future citizens to leverage their civic skills for the greater social good rather than for their own particular interests.

> Our kids now show us what we've told them America is all about, even if we haven't always believed it ourselves: that our future isn't written for us, but by us.
>
> **— BARACK OBAMA**

Teach current controversial issues. Students should also examine controversial *contemporary* issues. Students are frequently exposed to past historical controversies such as slavery, Nazism, or laws denying voting rights to women. But those same students are too often shielded from *today's* competing ideas such as the #MeToo movement, women's reproductive rights, misinformation campaigns that employ social media as a dangerous and powerful tool, and controversies over what should be taught in the school curriculum, how, and by whom. Engagement with contemporary controversies from a range of perspectives and using multiple sources of information is exactly what democratic participation requires.

Focus on the local. Teaching democratic forms of thinking without providing an environmental setting is not possible. Schools should encourage students to consider their specific surroundings and circumstances. One way to provide students opportunities to experience democratic participation in civic and political life is to engage students in community-based projects. Action civics is a particularly powerful and thoughtful way to foster civic participation that transcends community service to also include a focus on governmental policy and structural change (e.g., see Blevins, LeCompte, & Wells, 2016; Levinson, 2014).

We saw an example of action civics when students of Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in response to a mass shooting in their school, became key figures in a national dialogue on gun culture in the United States. While mobilizing both locally and nationally to agitate for gun control legislation, these students also organized demonstrations, supported electoral candidates, and registered voters. Their ability to connect a very personal experience with the ways in which government, policy, and social and economic forces shape their lives allowed them to participate on a national scale and, no doubt, prepared them for a life of effective civic engagement. In a tribute to the Parkland students in *Time Magazine*, former U.S. President Barack Obama (2018) observed, "Our kids now show us what we've told them America is all about, even if we haven't always believed it ourselves: that our future isn't written for us, but by us" (para. 9). When students have the opportunity to engage with civic 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.

Be political. Of course, choosing to be explicitly political in the classroom can cause friction for teachers—with students, parents, and administrators—even when teachers avoid expressing their own political views. Encouraging discussion, controversy, and action in the classroom can be daunting. 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 be supported and protected, encouraged to use political debates and controversy as teachable moments in civic discourse.

Not Just for Civics Teachers

Teaching students that they can be a part of making a better world is not the job of only civics teachers. To be sure, sometimes these kinds of lessons are called civic or citizenship education. But more often they take place throughout the school, in every classroom, hallway, cafeteria, and gymnasium. For example, schools teach children to follow rules, to wait their turn, and (ideally) to cooperate with others. Teachers (again, ideally) teach children how to acquire and process information and how to articulate their ideas to others—all necessary skills for participation in a community. 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, in how we live with one another in complex and diverse local, national, and global communities. Whether teachers explicitly teach lessons in citizenship or not, students learn about community organization, the distribution of power and resources, rights, responsibilities, and justice and injustice (Dewey, 1909/1975; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen 1993; Meier & Gasoi, 2018).

That is why when I think about citizenship education, I think about much more than teaching children about our legislative bodies, the court system, and how to vote. I am increasingly convinced of the importance of attending to the ways in which all aspects of our educational programs teach about living together in civic communities and with the people (or citizens) that comprise them. What kind of citizens does your school hope students will become? What kind of people do you hope will emerge?

In her influential book *The Way We Argue Now*, literary theorist Amanda Anderson (2006) argued that questions about how we should live should be central to literary criticism. I find the same to be true for education. We can teach students that we have choices about the ways we organize our lives, socially, economically, and politically. But to do so, educators must be enabled and encouraged to include those goals in the fabric of the school curriculum and its broader mission; education must be seen as more than an engine of the economy; and teachers must be allowed to build school cultures that impel students to envision a better world and to learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to make that world possible.

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