

An Ambitious Agenda for a Big Problem

A Review of *Making Civics Count*

Edited by David E. Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Frederick M. Hess

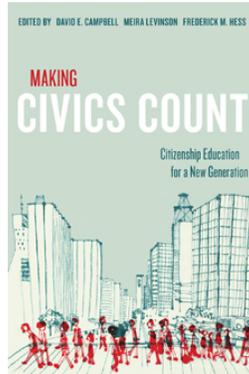
Review by Judith L. Pace

HOW TO EDUCATE DEMOCRATIC CITIZENS IS one of the most important problems in today's schools. *Making Civics Count: Citizenship Education for a New Generation*, edited by David E. Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Frederick M. Hess (2012) is an excellent collection of essays, written by some of the most prominent scholars in the field, that enriches our understanding of this problem and how to tackle it.

The book as a whole constitutes an ambitious agenda for citizenship education reform. The authors support their compelling arguments for this agenda with research findings and recommendations for action. The volume addresses multiple dimensions of civic education reform, challenges and opportunities located at the micro and macro levels of schooling, as well as specific cases of visionary work in K–12 schools and communities. It should be required reading for education leaders, scholars, reformers, and teacher-educators.

All the chapters in the book contribute to the central argument: Democratic citizenship in the United States is at serious risk, due to such factors as low levels of participation in civic life, racial and economic inequality, and political polarization in the government and citizenry. The unique potential and original purpose of schools to prepare enlightened and engaged citizens (Parker, 2003) must be revitalized so that we as a nation build the capacity to strengthen our democracy and tackle pressing challenges such as inequalities in civic and political participation, dysfunctional government, and the environmental health of the planet. Levine warns, "Reforming civics is a marathon, not a sprint. It cannot be solved with a single intervention but requires constant attention to the quality of the curriculum, pedagogy, teacher preparation, and assessment" (Levine, 2012, p. 56). Through a wealth of examples, the authors explain what constitutes quality and examine ways to achieve it.

Making Civics Count opens with a pair of chapters by Niemi and Levine, respectively, that present different claims about the state of civic knowledge among today's youth as measured by tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Niemi argues that the NAEP shows students' civic knowledge is seriously inadequate. Levine questions the NAEP's reliability and also points out that scores actually have not dropped over time. However, he agrees that American youth lack understanding of



current events and politics, and he highlights the problem of inequality across demographic groups—in both learning outcomes and opportunities. Both authors conclude that schools need to engage all students with "the realities of politics, with all its controversy, conflict, and compromise" (Niemi, 2012, p. 30). This conclusion is taken up repeatedly throughout the book.

The next two chapters, by Johaneck and Levinson, offer fascinating historical and contemporary perspectives on the role of schools in pluralistic communities. Johaneck's three cases of schools as civic centers illustrate

Dewey's vision of democratic education and offer inspirational models for joining education and social justice reform for the wider school community. The reader may draw connections to current efforts for full-service schools and collaborations among participatory actions researchers, students, and school leaders. Levinson, recognizing both the challenges and opportunities presented by myriad forms of demographic and cultural diversity, argues that educators must embrace all students, address conflicts in developmentally and democratically principled ways, and teach students how to navigate conflict and collaborate across differences. She underscores the obligation of schools to be genuinely welcoming environments, regardless of family legal status and religious or ideological leanings, implying that all teachers must be well-prepared social justice educators.

Another set of chapters discusses ways to revitalize civics curricula and pedagogy. Youniss reminds us of the value of classroom discussion, student government, and service learning. Kahne, Ullman, and Middaugh examine online activity among youth. They advocate for strengthening media literacy in school curricula as well as for using video games and social media as pedagogical tools, both inside and outside the classroom. Saavedra juxtaposes routine civics instruction, students' uninspired classroom experiences, and weak accountability for civics education

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with a vision of best practices, instructional resources, curricular programs, and strong accountability. The resounding question implicit in these authors' recommendations for teaching is the following: How can classroom teachers achieve these ideals?

Chapters on teacher education by Barton and professional development by Hess and Zola offer two answers to this crucial question. Barton contrasts the unique role of teachers in preparing young people for democratic life with pre-service teachers' typically underdeveloped understanding of democracy. He argues for teacher education programs that expand teacher-candidates' capabilities and commitments as agents of democratic education by immersing them in informed, high-quality deliberation of contemporary educational debates. Hess and Zola enlarge our view of teacher learning by discussing five characteristics of effective professional development programs and three exemplars in citizenship education. Given budget cuts and the nation's priorities on literacy and numeracy, they recommend appealing to private funders to support high-quality professional development programs focused on civic education and undertaking a nationwide research effort to investigate them.

Cambell views successful civic education through a different lens by focusing on the role of school context. In his chapter, Campbell compares civic learning outcomes in private and charter schools to those observed in public schools. He argues that, instead of highlighting the type of institution as a main variable, future research should investigate the relationship between school ethos and democratic education.

In the final chapter of *Making Civics Count*, Levinson states that the civic education cause "feels both self-evident and doomed" (p. 247). She asks why teaching for democracy is not happening, when we know so much about how and why to do it. I think about this question in two ways; one pertains to the larger purposes of schooling and the other to the local conditions of classroom teaching.

My first response is informed by the idea that, in regard to the larger purposes of schooling, democracy may be espoused, but in policy and practice, it is a low priority; in fact, it conflicts with other educational goals. David Labaree's (1997) book, *How to Succeed in School without Really Learning*, argues that education suffers from the fact that public and private economic purposes supersede the aims of democratic equality that originally animated the creation of public schools. Since Labaree's book was published, the problem seems to have worsened, despite the equity rhetoric of No Child Left Behind. Especially in a tenuous economy, politicians consistently frame education as the creation of a competitive workforce. School policies, supported by affluent parents, perpetuate the reproduction of inequality in which privileged students gain competitive advantage in a hierarchical system. Democratic equality is defined as reducing the achievement gap on test scores in reading and math. Citizenship education is a low priority, except for high-status students viewed as our future leaders. This challenge of economic obsession makes the civic education reform agenda even more critical.

Local classroom conditions inform my second response to the question of why teaching for democracy is not happening. I

believe we must grapple more seriously with what we are asking classroom teachers to do, so that "advocates of high-quality civic education get beyond preaching to the choir" (Levinson, 2012, p. 248). Major tensions exist between the realities of teaching culture, particularly in public schools attended by students with low-income and racial-minority backgrounds, and the rigorous, dialogic, and experiential approaches so powerfully advocated throughout the book.

Democratic teaching creates dilemmas, even in affluent schools. Let's face it: Democracy is messy and teaching it even messier. Along with limitations of teacher capability and insufficient professional development, there are important reasons from the teacher perspective for the gap between reform ideals and classroom practice. Increased student participation adds to the many distractions that interfere with teachers' goals for accomplishing classroom lessons (Kennedy, 2005). Controversy not only is very uncomfortable for many but also raises an even greater threat—conflict among students. Teachers must juggle many demands in the complicated universe of the classroom.

That public schools typically are highly controlling institutions operating under often-conflicting pressures from different constituencies reinforces teacher preoccupation with control. Linda McNeil's research shows how bureaucratic mandates (1986) and high-stakes accountability policies (2000) engender defensive teaching. Even in charter schools serving students from low-income and racial-minority communities, the widely touted culture of "no excuses" (Whitman, 2008, para. 5) or "paternalistic" (para. 3) authority raises questions about what kind of democracy students are being prepared to uphold.

These problems affirm the significance of a book that takes on the multiple dimensions and levels of civic education reform. Clearly, the issues it addresses implicate our system of schooling writ large, particularly the ways it disadvantages those who need it most. At the same time, reformers should acknowledge how much they are asking of K–12 teachers and grapple with the day-to-day challenges teachers face—from classroom management to raising standardized tests scores—to make this work more motivating and plausible for more of them.

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