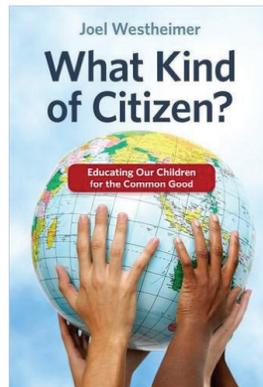

Democracy & Education

What Kind of Teacher for Our Citizens?

A Book Review of *What Kind of Citizen?
Educating Our Children for the Common Good*

Reviewed by Tony DeCesare (Saint Louis University)



WESTHEIMER'S (2015) CENTRAL argument in *What Kind of Citizen? Educating Our Children for the Common Good* is that the current climate around public education—marked, in general, by standardization in our schools—is not conducive to the development of thoughtful and critically engaged public citizens. Westheimer demonstrates convincingly that schools—in response to recent education reform and, in some cases, pressure from parents and other education stakeholders—have increasingly emphasized individual goals like “career preparation” and “economic gain” at the expense of educating children for the common good (p. 13). Furthermore, and related, in this age of standardized testing, school curricula have become more narrowly focused on achievement in math and literacy at the expense of the broader (and less testable) aims of citizenship education. In Westheimer's view, these are troubling developments, and his broad purpose with this book is to chart a corrective course for our schools.

But it is important to note that, by his own admission, Westheimer (2015) is not trying to convince us that schools should

teach citizenship. That they should do so, he says, “is a given” (p. 4). Thus, readers might be disappointed if, for instance, they are looking for a more philosophical discussion about whether citizenship should be taught or about how we should prioritize citizenship-related objectives relative to other, sometimes opposing, purposes of education. Those readers who do not, in fact, take it as a given that schools should teach citizenship—that is, those who are not ready to move on to questions about what kind of citizenship schools do or should promote—will likely be unmoved by this book. Westheimer's aim, instead, is to focus our attention on what he considers to be more pressing questions about the kind of society we imagine, the kind of citizens we want our children to be, and the kind of educational programs required to develop such citizens.

TONY DECESARE, PhD, is an assistant professor at St. Louis University. His research focuses on democratic education, equality, and approaches to social justice (most notably Amartya Sen's capability approach).

Toward this end, Westheimer (2015) opens with a story from his first year as a public school teacher in New York City. In studying the civil rights era, Westheimer's students quickly developed a strong moral objection to the overt racism in the United States during that time. What they failed to do—at least initially—was extend their critique of civil rights era racism to other and current instances of hateful prejudice. This more difficult achievement was ultimately made possible by Westheimer's deft handling of his class (which led to a transformative and unexpected contribution from one student in particular) and, it should be noted, by the principal's support of the class's pursuit of issues related to gay rights. The primary takeaway from this opening story is that schools in a democratic society need to promote children's critical understanding of "contemporary problems and injustices" in their communities and help them to "engage with the world around them and work to improve it" (p. 9). Indeed, this is the central purpose of the kind of citizenship education that Westheimer promotes in subsequent chapters.

Importantly, this opening story also serves as an effective reminder that citizenship education requires more than—indeed, something altogether different from and more difficult than—teaching students a "calcified version of past events" (Westheimer, 2015, p. 9). It requires, as Westheimer demonstrates both in this story and throughout the text, dynamic educators who can help students bring past events (and school lessons more generally) critically to bare on contemporary issues; it requires supportive school administrators; and, perhaps most important, it requires a general social commitment to public schools that prioritize and support students' development into thinking, engaged citizens.

Chapters two through four survey and critique the kinds of education reforms responsible for creating the current culture in and around schools—a culture in which we find "no child left thinking" and "no teacher left teaching." In chapter two, Westheimer (2015) discusses how an overemphasis on standardized assessments—fueled by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top—has created a "single-minded drive to make students better test-takers rather than better citizens" (p. 14). Goals related to the development of critical thinking have been marginalized and opportunities for deep analysis and discussion of social issues have diminished because of the "relentless focus on testing" and easily measureable "achievement" (p. 18).

Chapter three shifts attention to the effects of this culture on teachers (the profession of teaching more broadly) and education. Increasingly, teachers are charged with ensuring that all students are being taught "the same material in the same way at the same time so that standards and accountability measures can be established" (Westheimer, 2015, p. 20). The results are predictable enough: Teaching is increasingly de-professionalized. Teachers are reduced to transmitters of decontextualized factual content and stripped of their professional authority, intellectual freedom, and autonomy. Ironically—and this is the kind of important insight Westheimer offers throughout—teachers themselves are increasingly the "architects of their own pedagogical straightjackets" (Westheimer, 2015, p. 24). Whereas teachers have

long been subjected to restrictive policies and rules "dictated from above," they are now—in the 21st century—"being asked (and, seeing little choice, are agreeing) to adopt the task of standardizing curriculum or developing accountability strategies that can demonstrate numerical 'value-added' comparisons" (Westheimer, 2015, p. 24). In other words, they are being asked—and are, in effect, agreeing—to "make themselves interchangeable" and, therefore, they are perpetuating the de-professionalization of teaching and the "assembly-line malaise" that plagues many of our schools (Westheimer, 2015, pp. 25–26).

Chapter four, which serves as a sort of bridge between the state of schooling and teaching outlined in chapters two and three and the various approaches to citizenship education discussed in chapters five through eight, is framed by a revealing parable. Westheimer (2015) tells of a man searching for his keys directly underneath a streetlight rather than in the dark part of the street where the keys were actually dropped. When a passerby asks the man why he would search for the keys in a place where he knows he will not find them, the man replies, "because there's light here" (p. 27). Westheimer's point is simple but powerful: Despite our recognition that goals related to citizenship education matter, we have not thought imaginatively enough about how to assess achievement in these areas. Thus, "we turn instead to where the light is: standardized measures of students' abilities to decode sentences and solve mathematical problems. In other words, *since we can't measure what we care about, we start to care about what we can measure*" (p. 27). Before long, we are teaching what we can test and marginalizing or eliminating the rest, namely, in this case, the learning that is related to citizenship.

Schools and teaching do not have to be this way. And this brings Westheimer to the book's primary question: What kind of citizens do (and can) schools promote when they find ways to go beyond test preparation, narrow curricular goals, and standardized forms of teaching? To address this question, Chapters 5 through 7 draw heavily on Westheimer's previous research with Kahne, particularly their empirical study of various citizenship education programs (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Through this research, Westheimer and Kahne identified three distinct visions of citizenship, namely, what they call "personally responsible" citizenship, "participatory" citizenship, and "social justice-oriented" citizenship. Put simply, personally responsible citizens act responsibly in their communities; they might, for instance, contribute food to a food drive. Participatory citizens actively engage in their communities; they are more likely to organize the food drive. And justice-oriented citizens critically assess underlying social, political, and economic structures and try to improve society; they seek to understand why there are hungry people in their communities and work to root out the underlying causes of hunger.

Importantly, these three visions of the "good" citizen each reflect "a distinct set of goals. They are not cumulative" (Westheimer, 2015, p. 38). Furthermore, no one vision on its own is sufficient—each has potential strengths and each suffers from certain limitations. Westheimer sharpens this point by exploring examples of both national (though not standardized)

and local citizenship education programs that have incorporated the strengths of each vision of citizenship. These programs serve as models of what is possible when citizenship education is understood more deeply, conducted more intentionally, and focused on linking student “learning to the preparation of thoughtful, active, and democratically engaged citizens” (Westheimer, 2015, p. 69).

Overall, Westheimer (2015) has produced a timely and important book that will prove valuable to a wide audience. It is intended for educators, policymakers, and parents among others. He purposely draws on only the less technical aspects of his previous research, and he otherwise relies mostly on policy documents, reports, articles from popular and practitioner-oriented journals, and his own experiences to develop and communicate his ideas. Yet even those readers who are more academically oriented will come away with a deeper understanding of the current climate around education reform and schooling and with important insights into the kind of education that can promote democratic values, justice, and the common good. Indeed, all those who have a stake in schooling stand to benefit from taking up Westheimer’s invitation to think about how citizenship education programs can promote students’ abilities “to think critically, ask questions, evaluate policy, and work with others toward change that moves democracy forward” (p. 99).

In this invitation we are also likely to find inspiration. This might be especially true for teacher educators. If we continue the logic of Westheimer’s (2015) core questions—starting from the kind of society that we want and moving to the kind of citizens and schools such a society requires—we will inevitably arrive at a question about teacher education. What kind of teacher education programs do we need in order to develop teachers who are willing and able to embrace citizenship education as fundamental to their work and who are able to carry out this aspect of their work effectively with their own students and in their own classrooms, schools, and communities? What kind of teacher education programs do we need, in other words, to develop thinking, engaged citizen teachers? In addition to its other and perhaps more obvious benefits, Westheimer’s book can help us think more deeply about this important question. And it would, therefore, be a valuable addition to teacher education programs that seek to challenge preservice teachers to understand themselves as stewards of democracy and justice.

References

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