
Democracy & Education

What Kind of Citizens Do Educators Hope Their Students Become?

A Response to *Storypath: A Powerful Tool for Teaching Children Civic Learning*

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Abstract

McGuire, Stevahn, and Bronsther (2019) focused on civic education in elementary grades, an important but sorely missing topic in schools. Using Storypath, a simulation-like approach to address the housing affordability in Seattle, the authors showed how motivated and engaged students were with the topic. A major strength of the study is the authors' acknowledgment of the perils of children being denied of the opportunity to acquire the skills and dispositions that support participation in democratic social life. Also, they integrated civic learning with social and emotional learning (SEL) in a meaningful way. However, I argue in this response paper that both civic learning and SEL need an equity and social justice focus because our current democracy does not adequately care for everyone. Finally, I suggest that critical civic empathy could make a meaningful contribution to civic education.

This article is in response to

McGuire, M.E., Stevahn, L., Bronsther, S.W. Storypath: A Powerful Tool for Engaging Children in Civic Education. *Democracy and Education*, 27 (2), Article 4.

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“**S**TORYPATH: A POWERFUL Tool for Teaching Children Civic Learning” (McGuire, Stevahn, & Bronsther, 2019) is a study with fourth-grade students that addresses civic learning, a sorely missing topic in education. Civic education receives little attention in schools (Barr et al., 2015; Hope & Jagers, 2014), especially in elementary grades and in schools that serve students of color and students from lower-income communities. This is disconcerting because when asked about what they want for their students, many educators frequently answer that they want their students to be socially responsible, engaged citizens (Cohen, 2006). Indeed, an informed, ethical, thoughtful, and socially responsible citizenry is vital for preserving democracy and for preventing injustice (Barr et al., 2015; Hope & Jagers, 2014). Schools have a key role to play in preparing students for democracy and educating them on the value of equity and human rights.

A major strength of the study is the authors' recognition of the perils of children being deprived of the opportunity to develop the skills and dispositions that support participation in

democratic social life and their efforts to remedy that using Storypath as a learning tool.

Additionally, they demonstrated how Storypath, a simulation-like learning approach, includes several aspects of meaningful learning. For example, students worked cooperatively, engaging in dialogue, making compromises, using different types of intelligences and coconstructing their understanding. The authors also addressed different aspects of social-emotional learning (SEL), the current “zeitgeist in education” (Humphrey, 2013, p. 1). Coined by CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), SEL is “the process through which children and adults

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acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set, and achieve goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, n.d.). Cohen (2006) argued that an informed and thoughtful citizenry in a democratic society should also show self-awareness, emotional awareness, respect for others, empathy, ability to resolve conflict peacefully, and willingness to work cooperatively with others and to make ethical and responsible decisions. However, does the integration of SEL with civic learning support the development of engaged democratic citizens who uphold the principles of social justice and equity?

I commend the authors for their focus on civic learning in the elementary grades and their efforts of integrating SEL with civic education. I agree with them that SEL would be more meaningful if integrated with civic learning. However, missing from the article was a focus on civic learning for social justice and equity and efforts to encourage students to question what society takes for granted about its systems and institutions. I bring this up because, currently, our democracy does not take adequate care of minoritized and/or low-income communities. In this response, I argue that civic learning needs to be rooted in the principles of social justice, and I suggest how this could have been done in the study. Relatedly, I argue that what civic learning needs is not SEL in its current form but rather a more critical adaptation of SEL, given that several education scholars have pointed to current SEL's alignment with the goals of our social and political status quo that reinforce inequality (see Mirra, 2018). Storypath as a learning tool can be utilized to move toward a more critical adaptation of SEL. Finally, I propose integrating civic learning in elementary grades with critical civic empathy, a concept introduced by Mirra (2018) in her recent book *Educating for Empathy: Literacy Learning and Civic Engagement*.

Integrating Social Justice with Civic Learning

As I read Storypath, I could not help but wonder: Why was civic education important to the authors of the article? Specifically, what kind of citizens were they hoping the students in the study would become when they grow up? Most teachers agree that they want their students to be “good citizens.” However, opinions diverge once they are asked for a deeper explanation of what “good citizenship” means (Westheimer, 2015; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). According to Westheimer and Kahne (2004), there are three different types of citizenship. The first type is the personally responsible citizen, who acts responsibly toward their community by volunteering, obeying laws, and working and paying taxes. The second type is the participatory citizen, who is typically active in their community and takes initiative to take care of their community's needs. Finally, the justice-oriented citizen critically examines the social and economic structures in place and works toward understanding the root cause of injustice (Westheimer, 2015; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Social justice must be an aspect of citizenship (Sherrod, 2006) because democracy cannot be taken for granted (Barr et al., 2015). It can erode as a consequence of individual and collective apathy and indifference to injustice (Barr

et al., 2015). To thrive, a democracy needs citizens who make informed decisions about the fairness of laws and who will stand up to unjust laws (Sherrod, 2006). The authors could have seized the opportunity offered by the Storypath approach to focus on principles of social justice rather than only SEL.

According to the Census Bureau, income inequality is at its highest since they started tracking it more than 50 years ago (Telford, 2019). In Seattle, the unit's context, inequality is on the rise, and it is contributing to the crisis of affordable housing (Collins, 2019). A unit on affordable housing in Seattle lends itself naturally to discussions on inequality in the city and in the country. Also, nine-year-old students are ready and curious to learn about their world (Wood, 2018). Importantly, they are very interested in issues of fairness and justice (Wood, 2018). In other words, using Storypath to examine affordable housing in Seattle created the opportunity for justice-oriented citizenship development for the fourth-grade students in the study. Through inquiries that require critical thinking, analysis, reasoning, and dialogue about the root causes of the dearth of affordable housing or through discussions that question existing social, political, and economic norms, a justice-orientation citizenship could be promoted. According to Westheimer (2015),

When we deny students the opportunity to consider paths for change that involve a critical examination of collective social policy questions (and not just individual character), we also betray an important principle of democratic governance: the need for citizens to be able to engage in informed critique and make collective choices. (p. 45)

The development of a social-justice citizenship orientation could have been supported on several occasions during the unit. This could have been done by building on students' inclination for fairness and equity (see Hymel & Darwich, 2013, for a review) and/or by questioning students' opinions or problematizing things that are taken for granted (rendering the familiar strange). The authors alluded to the students' strong sense of fairness and their willingness to stand up to inequity on several occasions. For example, an excerpt from the dialogue with students indicated that students were identifying the unfairness of a tech employee being able to afford a home in the city but not the barista. Such a moment could have been used to engage students in critical inquiry regarding injustice, the root cause of the problem, and its implications for society. Furthermore, they could have explored the impact of money, profit, and growth on the local environment.

Unsurprisingly, the ways in which we are privileged (or marginalized) in life sways how we perceive the experiences of others (Mirra, 2018). During their deliberations about what buildings should be torn down or kept, students claimed that keeping the FBI office in Seattle was important because a lot of people felt safer. This statement was presented as common sense, but what would have happened if it were subjected to critical examination? Do all the people feel safer with an FBI office nearby? From what/whom do people need to feel safe in Seattle?

Also, the students' final decision to expand the boundaries of the city of Seattle was not questioned. Given that climate change is a pressing concern, the teacher could have seized the moment and

asked the students about the environmental implications of such an expansion. The key is not for students to have right answers. Rather, such an exercise helps in raising consciousness. Empowering students with the skill of subjecting their thoughts and ideas to critical questioning and examination is crucial for a thriving democracy. Critical theorists have long argued that what society often sees as “common sense” in reality signifies the experiences of those who are in social power and disregards the experiences of those who are marginalized (Mirra, 2018).

There are plenty of political challenges that need to be tackled in our time. Children deserve a civic education that will prepare them for the road ahead. Thus, social justice needs to inform students’ learning of civic education, and critical inquiry provides them with the tools to examine, question, and deconstruct power and privilege. As I explain next, like civic learning, SEL without a social justice lens—as it is predominantly taught in elementary schools—falls short in cultivating the skills children need in order to learn about the root causes of the existing inequities and to challenge the status quo.

SEL for Civic Education

Social-emotional learning in the absence of social justice—simply isn’t.

—Alice Ray

Since it was popularized by CASEL, SEL has garnered wide support. Perceived as the missing piece in education, SEL’s focus on self-regulation, emotions, empathy, and relationships appealed to educators and gained prominence in many American classrooms, especially elementary classrooms. Thanks to SEL, emotions were allowed into the classroom after being shut out for decades given that they were perceived as distracting and unruly (Bialostok & Aronson, 2016). No longer were students expected to suppress and dismiss them before stepping into the classroom (Bialostok & Aronson, 2016). However, emotions in SEL are approached as an individual matter (Hoffman, 2009; Zembylas, 2007), focusing on individualistic approaches (be kind, be nice, develop a growth mindset) and outcomes (e.g., prosocial behavior, academic performance, see Osher et al., 2016, for a review), and the authors followed SEL’s approach. In the study, SEL was integrated by having students complete a sheet that asked them to reflect on several aspects of SEL, including their listening, cooperative, and problem-solving skills. It seemed that it was also integrated by having students discuss and reflect on their group dynamics. Before I proceed, I am compelled to clarify that I am not dismissing the importance of SEL skills such as listening and cooperating with peers, but they are not enough when teaching civic education that values equity and human rights.

Zembylas (2007) emphasized that emotions are not an individual matter only. They are also “a political space in which students and teachers interact with implications in larger political and cultural struggles” (Zembylas, 2007, p. 293). The authors did not mention whether the topic of the unit was emotionally unpacked with the students. How was the topic of unaffordable housing affecting them? Were they confused, angry, or sad after a

discussion, and why? How were the students’ own lives impacting their emotional engagement with the topic? Did the teacher make connections between their emotions, their strong sense of fairness, and the wider sociopolitical context? Very rarely has SEL, as typically taught in elementary schools, attended to emotion as a political space that involves issues of inequity, power, and privilege. A focus on individualistic approaches and outcomes does not automatically support students in developing their convictions and standing up for them, which are both critical for democratic citizenship. In fact, sometimes, kindness, niceness, and empathy can be used to avoid thinking about societal systems and questioning existing policies and norms (Westheimer, 2015). Therefore, SEL integrated with civic learning needs to recognize the sociopolitical context in which student learning is happening and how power and privilege operate there and to be coupled with reasoning and questioning of current systems.

Simmons (2019) has recently emphasized that SEL can be problematic if taught to students without context, especially for students of color. She argued that although SEL’s components naturally lend themselves to violence prevention and peace-building, teaching SEL needs to happen within a sociopolitical and racial context, which is profoundly impacted by inequity and injustice, with serious bearings on students’ lives (Simmons, 2019). SEL integrated with civic education needs to help children develop self-awareness and social awareness (both SEL components) that get them to question power and privilege when examining deep-seated social problems (such as lack of affordable housing) that affect democratic life.

In the study, SEL’s components, such as self-awareness or social awareness, were not utilized in a way that acknowledged the issues of power and privilege that are integral to the unit on Seattle’s housing challenges. If we want a civic education that prevents apathy to injustice and ensures the thriving of a democracy that protects vulnerable groups, we need to have a dialogue with children about how issues of racism, sexism, and corporate greed could be factors affecting the housing crisis. The inequity involved in housing unaffordability was strikingly missing in the study. Thus, I find it fitting here to raise the question that Simmons (2019) has raised: Why would we discuss self-awareness and social awareness if we shy away from talking about power and privilege?

Further, self-awareness, emotional awareness, and social awareness need to be coupled with critical analysis and reasoning during lessons on civic learning. For example, the authors mentioned several times that the debate about keeping Starbucks was loud and heated. This could have been a great opportunity to connect self-awareness and social awareness and empathy to the power that corporations have in our society and their impact on affordable housing. What would have happened if the teacher had asked students whether their emotions would have been this strong if another, less known, neighborhood coffee shop that was not worth billions of dollars was in danger of closing? What was it about Starbucks that got them riled up? What would have happened if the expansions happening in Seattle were questioned to get students to think of the lives of those displaced because of them—especially since they were aware that Seattle was home to

major tech businesses like Amazon and Microsoft? Against this backdrop, I suggest that civic education in the elementary grades could benefit from the principles of critical civic empathy.

Critical Civic Empathy for Civic Learning

In *Educating for Empathy: Literacy Learning and Civic Engagement*, Mirra (2018), a former English language arts (ELA) teacher, argued for a new vision of empathy for English teachers that is explicitly dedicated to tackling the inequities in public life and to examining democratic power structures—critical civic empathy. According to Mirra (2018), there are three defining characteristics to critical civic empathy:

1- It begins from an analysis of the social position, power, and privilege of all parties involved; 2- It focuses on the ways that personal experiences matter in the context of public life; 3- It fosters democratic dialogue and civic action committed to equity and justice. (p. 7)

Mirra (2018) also expressed her concern about SEL. In critiquing SEL, she highlighted that SEL conceptualizes empathy in a way that does not promote social change but rather sustains compliance to the current social and political status quo. She stressed that SEL does not acknowledge the social structures that affect individual lives and the power and privilege that are coupled with those structures; thus, she suggested that SEL has no aims to “building a more responsive civic sphere” (p. 13). In her book, Mirra (2018) illustrated how different ELA educators engaged their students with critical literacy lessons that fostered empathy and civic engagement in their communities. Some of the educators used literary analysis, some used debate, and others used youth participatory action research. In all examples, the three basic principles of critical civic empathy guided the educators’ work. The Storypath approach in elementary civic education classes is an opportunity to nurture students’ critical civic empathy. The study showed that dialogue is central to the approach (principle 2) and that students’ experiences are included in unit development (principle 3). What would require more attention is engaging students with the kind of learning that deconstructs privilege and power (principle 1). This is key if educators want to prepare students to confront the political challenges of our time. Anything short of that will ensure the preservation of the status quo, which deeply suffers from inequities in almost every aspect of public life (Mirra, 2018).

Closing Thoughts

“Civic education is an essential, though often marginalized, component of educating America’s youth” (Barr et al., 2015, p. 2), and schools have the means to fix that. Importantly, our education system should not wait until middle and high school to teach civic education. Children in elementary school are not only ready but eager to learn about their world and are very interested in issues of fairness and justice (see Wood, 2018). Why not design learning opportunities that take their natural interests into account?

The authors of “Storypath: A Powerful Tool for Teaching Children Civic Learning” showed how the Storypath approach is an engaging learning tool for civic education in elementary grades. However, I would be remiss if I did not ask about the type of

citizens that the authors wish their students become. If the authors wanted their students to become young adults who would stand up to injustice, then they needed to prepare students for a justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Personally, responsible citizenship education and participatory citizenship education do not address root causes of social problems, such as affordable housing.

Education is political. Of course, public schools do not want to be perceived as telling their students who to vote for, but what teachers choose to include or exclude in their teaching conveys what is valued in education and in the society for which that education is expected to prepare us for (Mirra, 2018; Nieto, 2006). To challenge the current social and political climates, both, SEL and civic education need to intentionally and explicitly have an equity focus.

Additionally, critical civic empathy could be a meaningful addition to civic education, given its focus on inequity, power structures, dialogue, and people’s lives. Deep inequities currently affect many facets of our democracy and public life, and the consequences are dire if democracies are indifferent to injustice (see Barr et al., 2015). Schools are well positioned to help raise children who are empathic and civic minded and who also question the current injustices in the sociopolitical system and who are equipped with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to make a difference.

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