
Democracy & Education

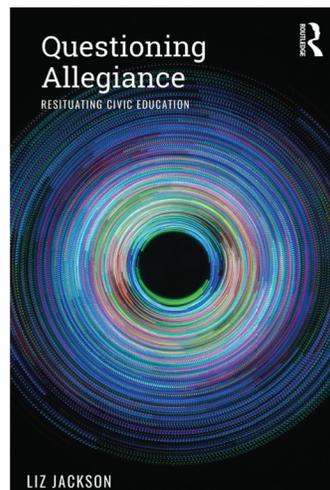
A Vision for Change.

A Book Review of *Questioning Allegiance: Resituating Civic Education*

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IN A TIME where global tensions are running high and productive dialogue on conflict resolution feels difficult to come by, *Questioning Allegiance: Resituating Civic Education* (2019) provides a rousing manifesto of how “civic education should enable people to learn and to live together within societies as well as across them” (p. 143). Jackson (2019) covers a vast amount of territory throughout this well-researched piece, drawing on theory and research in civic education in the global arena, to provide a compelling argument for creating a global system of civic education that will teach people to live together in a way that leads to positive social change. The book begins with a broad outline of the problem in addressing the challenge of learning to live together and moves through a meta-analysis to provide context for key concepts, such as defining civilizations, global education, and localism, to a more practical application of rethinking media consumption and the goals of civic education in both formal and informal ways.

Jackson (2019) sets the stage by laying the foundations of why people have difficulty in learning to live together through an overview of the concentric circles model of relationships, which begins with the individual at the center, then steadily moves out to close family and friends, to local connections outside the family, to the nation (or broader society), to the region (including the continent), and finally to the outermost global circle, which includes all of humanity. Jackson provides a comprehensive analysis of the traditional approach to using this model of understanding, which focused on navigating each of the circles as known,



competing entities, and then urges readers to focus on learning about the players in each of the circles. Instead of taking each piece of the concentric circles framework at face value, Jackson asserts, “Entities should not be taken as known, but instead scrutinized” (p. 4). This theme of questioning everything we have thought to be taken as truth is the foundation of the book and emerges throughout the chapters as a steady call to action.

Woven within the literature base of each chapter are Jackson’s (2019) arguments for social justice. In Chapters 2 (“Civilisation and Culture in Education”) and 3 (“Patriotism and Nationalism in Education”), she argues that the generally accepted goals of civic education as presented by nation-states to teach students what the government wants them to know is largely problematic. She writes, “What is often presented as social science fact or as justified moral prescription in this context is, seen more comprehensively, empirically and normatively questionable, and sometimes morally problematic” (p. 15). Jackson has long stressed the point that teaching about civilizations is, in fact, quite controversial, and when done in a way that encourages cultural groups to stick together, this type of teaching will serve to exclude people in minority groups from having a sense of belonging (Jackson, 2014).

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Instead, it is critical to create a multitude of ways and spaces for people to feel supported and to treat diversity as normal rather than as an outlier. Rather than using civic education to indoctrinate students to have allegiance to their nation-state, Jackson (2019) advocates for teaching them about different forms of allegiance to give students tools to make well-informed decisions. She makes a brave and important point in her discussion on ethno-nationalism, stating that this type of teaching “is not a moral variant of nationalism to teach in schools, although there may be good reasons to teach about it. Such ethno-nationalism should be directly taught against, as not justified” (p. 39). Jackson returns to this theme later in the book, saying, “Some views are dangerous and unjustified . . . Schools and teachers should teach directly against these harmful views” (p. 125). She is referring here to views that are racist, sexist, and anti-LGBTQ+ and other forms of discriminatory rhetoric.

The discussion of patriotism is followed by a comprehensive analysis of neoliberalism and cosmopolitanism in Chapter 4 (“Globalisation and Education”), outlining the clashes between a global education system focused on economics and a system focused on social and political dimensions. The author (Jackson, 2019) outlines the challenge for educators to provide a global perspective by saying how in “any sort of contest between the global and the national, the national is likely to prevail, given that nation-states remain accountable for education within their borders” (p. 60). The next chapter continues moving along the concentric circles to the local, where Jackson (2019) describes how local education has many positive aspects in that it can accurately reflect the needs of particular communities but can be problematic when a focus on the local leads to ignoring globalization. In addition, she discusses how focusing on local civic education without critique can be misleading, as systems of oppression need to be considered to truly capture the dynamics of a community. The author writes, “Localization is not necessarily promising without resource redistribution, as residential geographies reflect historical legacies of racial segregation and structural injustice in many places” (p. 73).

In Chapter 6, Jackson (2019) begins to explore the close family and friends that create the interpersonal relationships with youth. She discusses the powerful role schools have in teaching young people about how to engage with each other, and the importance of creating a sense of belonging. For example, she discusses how microaggressions in schools can create an atmosphere that feels exclusionary to students, and she illustrates how teachers who say that there is controversy around same-sex parents harm all students. Students who do not identify as straight or conform to mainstream gender roles may themselves feel excluded, and students who do not identify as LGBTQ+ may be led to discriminate against students who do, if they are not taught to care for and respect each other. This discussion is followed up by Chapter 7 (“Individual in Education”), which provides an overview of moral and civic education foundations that promote positive thinking and optimism. While the author agrees that there are

positive messages to take from here, she stresses that it is not always possible to remain optimistic in real life, which can be messy at times. Students need to know that even when things are difficult, it is okay to express negative experiences and know they are a part of life.

Chapter 8 (“Media and Civic Education”) focuses on how, traditionally, schools provide media consumption for students in a way that is not meant to be critiqued. Jackson (2019) describes how media that are put forward come from funding from the national government or large corporations and can often be described as biased rather than neutral. While critical media literacy is an important skill for students to have, a difficulty arises in that it has become challenging for teachers to keep up with students in terms of media literacy.

The final sections of the book, Chapter 9 (“Rethinking Civic Education”) and Chapter 10 (“Conclusion”), illustrate a way forward in which educators can reconstruct civic education to examine diverse views, look at multiple perspectives, and analyze issues around identity both inside and outside of the classroom. Instead of offering only one dedicated time for students to hear about civic education, educators need to make a commitment to integrate civic learning throughout the curricular and extracurricular opportunities provided to students. Jackson (2019) acknowledges that educators may be resistant to this type of education in that it is difficult to assess success, and it is also difficult to teach. However, she emphasizes that regardless of challenges, it is imperative for educators to push back against the norm of educating for national allegiance, and instead push students to question this allegiance.

The book provides a theoretical foundation for how civic education can and should look, which is a valuable and needed contribution to the field. Readers already committed to social justice will find that the author clearly articulates a vision for civic education that feels exciting and important, synthesizing concepts across civic education to redesign the existing framework that is currently failing to service students effectively. Jackson (2019) provides a global perspective, using examples from China and the United States to illustrate where change is needed and the potential for a redesign in civic education to create powerful change.

As the author (2019) clearly states, the book is not pedagogical in nature, and the concepts presented may feel difficult to enact in practice. While some teachers may feel excited about the prospects of bringing in multiple perspectives and having dialogue across difference, they may not know how to accomplish this potentially daunting task. This book creates the goals to strive toward, and the next step will be to create scaffolded ways for educators to feel supported in bringing this theory to practice.

References

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