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# Democracy & Education

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## Starting with Children's Democratic Imagination.

A Response to *That's My Voice! Participation and Citizenship in Early Childhood*

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### Abstract

The article adds to a growing conversation that recognizes and supports young children's civic capabilities, positioning them as citizens-now and not simply citizens in the future. They detail how three different classrooms sought to work with children to engage in social action on behalf of their broader community. This response wonders alongside the authors about how adults can best work with children to support their civic action and proposes that teachers engage children's visions for a more just, humanizing democratic society. The article offers three avenues of action for teachers as they support children's civiness: reflection on our views and experiences with democracy, educating ourselves in the traditions and histories of community organizing, and developing practices that involve children's visions of society.

### This article is in response to

Miller Marsh, M., Kenyon, E. A., Cardy, T., West, E. M. (2020). *That's My Voice! Participation and Democratic Citizenship in the Early Childhood Classroom*. *Democracy & Education*, 28(2), Article 1. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol28/iss2/1>

### A Text-to-Self Connection

**W**HILE TEACHING FIRST grade in a public school in New York City, I participated in a teacher research group<sup>1</sup> in which we inquired into how young children could change their world. Some of those changes felt far-reaching, such as when my students identified the person in power who could help their cause and then composed letters to that person. Noah (all names have been changed to pseudonyms) wrote to the city's mayor about the very large-scale issue of global warming—he questioned the number of taxis on the street and advocated for people to use public transportation as he and his family did. Other aspects of creating change in the world fell more closely within

the microcosm of our classroom. As a teacher, I learned to pay attention to the everyday problems that arose by living and learning together in a classroom community.

One of those everyday problems for our first-grade class involved the delivery of milk cartons during our classroom lunchtime (see also Payne, 2015; Swalwell & Payne, 2019). When we did not receive the correct amount of milk, students noticed and advocated that we needed to do something. We engaged in a conversation about what to do. A group of students suggested going down to the cafeteria right then and there to talk with the cafeteria

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<sup>1</sup> Teachers College Reading and Writing Project Leadership Group led by Sarah Picard Taylor. See also, Taylor (2008).

workers and demand the missing milk. Instead, we wrote a letter that I delivered at the end of the day to the cafeteria workers.

At the time, I steered the conversation away from taking immediate action through all manner of reasons: We would interrupt the cafeteria workers while they did their job, and we knew how frustrating that could be. The middle schoolers were in the cafeteria, and it would be too crowded and busy. We would miss out on our lunchtime. I asked my students, “What is another way we could let the cafeteria workers know about our problem?” All of this reasoning and brief conversation led to that letter. As the teacher, I knew that a letter was an opportunity for literacy work and explicit curricular connections. A letter went along with our upcoming end-of-year writing unit on letter writing. Yet by navigating our conversation toward the letter, I missed an opportunity to engage seriously with the ideas of civic action that my students advocated.

Since that moment, I have done research looking at democratic education and civic action in early childhood settings. I have thought deeply about that decision and brought it into question. In our exploration of critical civic education for young children, Katy Swalwell and I explored this vignette and asked: “What teachable moment could have arisen from the children marching to the cafeteria? How did she [the teacher] limit their capabilities in the moment of steering them toward a particular civic action?” (Swalwell & Payne, 2019, p. 130). I have also reflected on how my social position as a White, economically privileged woman impacted how I saw that “teachable moment.” Ladson-Billings (2017) has asked us to consider, what is the “right way to protest?” This prompted me to question how my raced/classed/gendered civic experiences influence my views of social change. Further, I wonder how curricular mandates obscured other possible directions to expand students’ civicness. What if we dove into an inquiry about people’s different civic action strategies to enact change? What if we discussed reasons to go or not to go to the cafeteria, including learning more about our cafeteria workers’ lives? In other words, what if I had sat in that moment with children, rather than jumping straight to acting?

As a first-grade teacher then, and now as a researcher and teacher educator, I feel complicated about how I, the adult, engaged with children’s civic action. On the one hand, I took an everyday problem and supported the students to act on behalf of their community members. That year, the six- and seven-year-old children in that class continued to act on issues that felt unfair, making our classroom a space rife with the agency to act on behalf of other people. On the other hand, I limited students’ civic action to a strategy that aligned with the curriculum and what felt comfortable and known to me. While I still wrestle with these uncertainties, I think that the issue has less to do in the discrete choice of one strategy over another. Rather, I did not fully engage my students as young children who already had civic capabilities and also were developing their civic repertoires. I did not fully engage their democratic imagination.

At the heart of these reflections are questions about how teachers participate in democratic civic education with young children: What role should teachers play? How can teachers

both recognize students’ civicness and support expanding children’s civic capabilities? How can teachers support young children’s development of democratic skills while not imposing their agendas and visions of democracy? Is that viable? Or desirable? Marsh et al. (2020) pushed me, as I read “That’s My Voice! Participation and Citizenship in Early Childhood,” to reflect on my teaching and these continual tensions between democracy and schooling.

### Democratic Education for and with Our Youngest Citizens

Much of the literature in democratic civic education focuses on older students in middle-school and high-school settings. We learn a great deal from research that looks at “what type of citizen” pedagogies and curricula support (e.g., Sondel, 2015; Swalwell, 2013; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Research also has examined how varied approaches to democratic civic education relate to larger civic issues such as political polarization (Hess & McAvoy, 2014) and political participation (Levine, 2007). Further, there is important scholarship that calls into question approaches to democratic civic education that centers whiteness and liberalism (e.g., Ayers, 2020; Gibson, 2020; Rodríguez, 2018). Too often, though, civic education research with young children applies these frames developed with older youth, which does not foreground research about early childhood learning and development. Instead, borrowing constructs focused on older youth risks imposing the future-oriented view of young children as citizens-in-training and negates the sophisticated embodied civicness of young children (see Payne et al., 2020a).

There is growing attention to children’s civic education in early childhood and elementary grades and the need to recognize young children’s civic capabilities (e.g., Hauver, 2019; Krechevsky et al., 2014; Mitra & Serriere, 2015); additionally, there is related scholarship within early childhood scholarship focused on issues of equity and justice (e.g., Jones et al., 2016; Phillips, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2013). “That’s My Voice! Participation and Citizenship in Early Childhood,” by Marsh et al. (2020), is a welcome addition to the conversation that both recognizes and supports young children’s civic lives. The authors highlight how high-quality, play-based curricula create opportunities for young children to dialogue with one another and engage in problem-solving. These activities allow children to develop skills in listening, speaking, negotiating, and conflict resolution—all necessary for democratic life (see Apple & Beane, 2007; Astuto & Ruck, 2010). As children develop these skills, they are also active members of communities inside and outside of their school, and as such are not “simply future citizens.” Rather, like calls within the international literature (e.g., Lister, 2007), young children are “citizens-now,” not “citizens-in-training.” With this as their foundation, Marsh et al. (2020) set out to examine how faculty and staff, that is, the adults in school, could “generate more authentic civic participation experiences *with* rather than simply *for* [emphasis in original] children.”

Marsh et al. (2020) highlight three different classrooms in which educators engaged children to act on behalf of their communities outside of the school. One class worked toward engaging with diverse groups of people through a Valentine’s Day card-making project with residents from a local nursing home. Another

engaged in cleaning up a nearby meadow; a smaller group took further steps to address the possible roots of the problem of littering in their community. This smaller group sought help from people who held power—the superintendent and a local radio station. Finally, the third class made food for a local homeless shelter, and then a smaller group engaged with the shelter by volunteering to serve the food they had made. Across all three classrooms, teachers accepted children’s varied engagement and participation with the projects. While some children enthusiastically chatted with elders or eagerly served their homemade zucchini bread to people at the homeless shelter, others displayed more hesitancy to engage with the broader community.

To arrive at these projects, all three classrooms attempted to elicit a social problem on which to focus through a classroom discussion led by the teacher via a recollection of past projects and then asking the question “How could we help or give service?” The first two classrooms’ projects emerged from this discussion. The first class’s project came from the teachers developing a project based on children’s ideas. In the second class, the students directly chose their project during the discussion. In the third classroom, the teachers held a discussion but then waited to see what interests emerged from children’s play—a pedagogic move that aligned with the school’s Reggio Emilia approach to learning. The teachers extended the children’s interest in cooking through reading aloud children’s literature that addressed food and housing insecurity. Each project had the goal of civic action broadly; however, how the class identified a social problem and subsequent actions to address that issue varied. How each classroom defined their project became essential to how children engaged and further developed their civic capacities.

These varied approaches to engaging with young children and civic action mirror scholarship focused on advancing civic engagement and action in elementary settings (e.g., Alarcón et al., 2017; Hauver, 2019; Mitra & Serriere, 2015). Across these studies, adults maintained a central role in controlling opportunities for acting civically. In some cases, teachers controlled the content (e.g., Beck, 2003, Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000; Ohn & Wade, 2009), while in others they controlled the form of action taken (e.g., Mitra & Serriere, 2015; Payne, 2015). To be clear, I am not arguing that adults should not support young children in civic action by purposefully including social issues in curriculum or highlighting civic strategies in our pedagogy. The point I ponder here is how to balance one vision of democracy and civic action with opening space for young children to experiment and possibly imagine democracy anew.

### **Children’s Visions of Justice and an Ideal Society**

I return here to the question that my self-reflection raised: In democratic civic education with our youngest students, what role should adults play both to support the expansion of children’s civic capabilities and to develop a vision for democracy? Marsh et al.’s (2020) study acknowledged that adults need to work *with* young children by engaging them in dialogue and social action about “what could and should change in society so that the injustices that create community challenges no longer exist” (p. 4). As educators, we must first engage young children in thinking about their

vision of community and for society writ large. Wheeler-Bell (2014) has argued that a critical civic education develops a “spirit of activism” (p. 464), which helps students to identify current injustices and their root causes, to reflect on and express a conception of an ideal society that promotes human flourishing and to develop strategies to work collectively on those issues and toward that ideal through social movements. Katy Swalwell and I have underscored this approach for young children by arguing that it broadens our view of children’s capabilities and asks educators to see how everyday concerns that arise in a classroom afford opportunities for children to develop this spirit of activism (Swalwell & Payne, 2019).

In the second and third classrooms in this study, the teachers followed the children’s lead to solve a problem in the community. The projects began from the position of helping—the teachers asked, “How could we help or give service?” If teachers began from the children’s vision for society, they might start by asking what the children noticed in their communities that felt unfair. What problems have children seen in their classroom, school, or community? Beginning with the children’s ideas of justice would center the problems they notice impacting their way in the world. As in the case of my student Noah, who saw global warming as a problem, this approach does not limit children to mundane problems, although, I would argue there are no problems that are mundane when they affect our ability to thrive together. Rather, centering children’s view of problems centers working on inequities and examining those before jumping in to help.

In the third classroom, the teachers observed a group of children who spent significant time in dramatic play cooking. The teachers extended this culinary interest and prompted the justice issue of food and housing insecurity through reading aloud children’s literature, such as *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen* by Dyanne Disalvo-Ryan. These teachers, while still offering the invitation to the issue through literature, allowed children to identify the problem. The children’s concern for housing and food insecurity led to a project to make food for a local shelter; while the adults initially brought the food to the shelter, the children expressed interest to directly give the food to people. The authors noted the children’s reflection on their experience handing out their zucchini bread, including, “I wanted them to get some food because I wanted them to grow and be healthy.” This case highlights how teachers can introduce justice issues into the curriculum and see how children take up those ideas. The invitation through literature allowed children to wonder and question why people did not have homes or food. Reading through this project, I could not help but wonder what children would have brought up if given the chance to go deeper with their inquiry before deciding on a means to help. Could the teachers have shifted to supporting children’s development of their vision of a better society? What actions might they have chosen after this type of inquiry?

The questions I raise here are not a critique of the projects that these teachers engaged young children in doing; I commend these teachers for seeing the powerful connection between a play-based curriculum, social inquiry, and civic action. In the first classroom, while the children did not develop their project, they

did engage in important intergenerational learning. Highlighting the importance of relationships with varied communities, as well as engaging with the knowledge and stories of elders, is powerful learning for young children. These projects made me think deeply about how in each classroom, for their next projects with children, the teachers might further center children's voices, concerns, and visions for society. In that spirit, I offer the next three short sections as spaces to consider the work that teachers could do to support young children in not only helping others but also developing their democratic imaginary for a more just, humanizing society.

### **Reflecting on Our Views and Experiences with Democracy**

When I look back at the milk-carton incident in my classroom, I reflect on how my experiences and ideas of democracy influenced my pedagogic decisions at that moment. While I had some experiences participating in a protest march, I had much more experience identifying a person in power and writing directly to them. Beyond thinking of the strategies I could recall at that moment, I think as educators committed to reflective practice (e.g., Zeichner & Liston, 2013), we must also consider how our varied social positions impact how democracy does or does not work for us. Consider the following questions:

*Democratic roots:* How has democracy as it is currently instantiated in your country benefited you? How has democracy in its current form worked against you? Put another way, what aspects of democracy can you access? And why is that? (For examples, see Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Ayers, 2019; Gibson, 2020; Vickery, 2015).

*Developing democratic skills:* What have been your experiences with democratic institutions? With civic action? With community organizing? Even when we consider the fundamental right to vote, we must consider the continued suppression of voters in the United States. For example, in March 2020, voters in Wisconsin never received absentee ballots, and many were forced to go to the polls amid stay-at-home orders during a global pandemic (see Corasaniti & Saul, 2020).

*Digging into democratic values:* What values undergird your conception of democracy and justice?

The answers to these questions influence how teachers view young children's civic acts and impact the type of support given to further expand their civic capabilities. These are purposefully big and broad questions. Gutmann (1999) argued that "democratic education begins not only with children who are to be taught but also with citizens who are to be their teachers" (p. 49). We need to think deeply about how we, as teachers seeking to enact democratic education, have been socialized into an often inequitable democracy.

### **Educating Ourselves on Community Organizing**

There is a long history of social movements in the United States. When people envision social movements, they often picture people protesting in the streets. Protest and the right to assemble are

essential to social movements and raising awareness about social issues. They are not, however, the only way that social movements function. Social movements require multiple strategies that often move toward making changes at a legislative and institutional level. Teachers can support children's actions by deepening their knowledge of community-organizing strategies (e.g., Alinsky, 1971; Eichler, 1995) and varied social movements, for example, the Chicano rights movement (El Movimiento), the American Indian Movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Looking at movements, teachers can attend particularly to those in which children have been leaders, for example, the Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963 (e.g., Hudson & Houston, 2004), children's activism against immigration policy (e.g., Kahn, 2017), and young people's role in the global climate change movement (e.g., Martin, 2014).

Learning about movements is one way to ground discussions with children and open additional spaces for inquiry. Movements also highlight how people identify issues, raise awareness, and then enact varied strategies to advance changes. The more that teachers know about these avenues for change, the better they can support children's civic action.

### **Developing Practices That Privilege Children's Visions of Society**

Teachers can start with knowing what their real and ideal vision of democracy is; then they can open up space for young children to develop their democratic imagination. Wheeler-Bell's (2014) call for critical civic education highlighted a need to be "child-centered" in a way that expands from its use in early childhood education, where teachers focus on the learning needs of the child. In his conception, Wheeler-Bell argued that a child-centered civic education is guided by the "long-term needs of the child's ability to flourish" (p. 470) instead of the needs of society (workers in a particular economic sector).

To that end, what opportunities do teachers give young children to envision a society that allows them to flourish? I want to be careful here that we do not ascribe to romantic ideals of childhood; instead, I look to Nxumalo et al. (2018), who argued that early childhood spaces need "to engage with what can be seen as belonging to the political" (p. 443). Multiple classroom opportunities directly connect to how we relate within the broader politic. Consider how the following scenarios might sustain children's democratic imagination: developing and revisiting community norms and rules, engaging in community circles to solve issues and problems (e.g., Charney, 2002), negotiating the use of classroom materials and resources (e.g., Payne et al., 2020b), and creating spaces for inclusion in play (e.g., Paley, 2009). These everyday spaces enable children to negotiate their ideals of living and learning together.

As Marsh et al. (2020) note, one of the main ways that teachers can engage children's vision of society is through listening. Yoon and Templeton (2019) wrote, "Listening is an active, engaged practice requiring adults to hear children's intentions over their own agendas and ingrained presumptions" (p. 57). In this case, listening goes beyond the physical act of hearing what children say

and asks that adults attend to what children do in their play and interactions. For young children, their civicness is embodied; in other words, they express their ability to act with and on behalf of their community (be civic) through both verbal and nonverbal actions (see Payne et al., 2020a). Adults need to challenge themselves to move beyond learning about children's ideas from only an oral discussion and toward attending to the multiple modalities in which children express their civicness. The challenge within democratic education is working the tension between teachers wanting to produce a particular type of democratic citizen and affording young children space to enact their intentions and ideals.

## Starting with Children

There is an inherent, but perhaps productive tension in supporting children's expansion of civic capabilities while not imposing our adult agendas and visions of democracy. While the teachers in this study sought to support children's civic action within their broader community, I wonder if perhaps they also skipped a step in their process of listening to children. Democratic education that centers children's vision of a more just, humanizing democracy requires opportunities for children to develop their democratic imagination. This does not mean that the teacher has no role in the inquiry. As Marsh et al. (2020) noted, teachers can spark children's curiosity and questions about society through children's literature, through invitations to explore and talk with people in their community, and by drawing on children's deep capacity to care and help others (e.g., Payne, 2018). The classrooms described in this study highlight children's civic capabilities. I wonder what more children might show us about a just democracy if we decentered our adult agendas and instead foregrounded children's democratic imaginations.

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