
Democracy & Education

Teaching “Justice Citizens” in Australia.

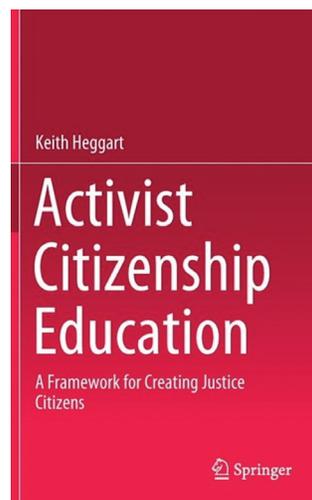
A Book Review of *Activist Citizenship Education:*

A Framework for Creating Justice Citizens

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ACTIVIST CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: *A Framework for Creating Justice Citizens* by Keith Heggart (2020) is a valuable and well-organized book. Heggart has taught in both secondary and higher education institutions in Australia, and he showcases these experiences in the book with his use of research portraits, or “vignettes,” which allow for vivid description. As the book engages with theories of citizenship education while also providing empirical data and support to back up its arguments, educational researchers and theorists and classroom teachers, particularly those with an interest in activism, will find this book helpful.

Activist Citizenship Education includes a preface by James Arvanitakis, titled “The Contradictions of Citizenship.” This is followed by thirteen authored chapters, which are organized into four sections. The first section introduces crucial themes (e.g., distributed decision-making, emergent learning, and self-organizing systems) of the book and discusses how they are related to complexity theory and complexity pedagogy. The chapters in this section focus on such topics as the recent resurgence of civic action among youth, the place of young people in the public sphere, and the organization potential of networks and social media. The second section critically explores different models of civics and citizenship education. Here, the chapters examine the current climate and “failures” of citizenship education in Australia in detail, as well as some alternative and nongovernment forms of citizenship education. In the third section, Heggart summarizes philosophies and typologies of civics and education before analyzing data



from his participatory action research project, Justice Citizens, which includes information on student and teacher attitudes and understandings about civics and citizenship education in a catholic school in Sydney. The last section describes Heggart’s recommended approach to civics and citizenship education, which he calls “justice pedagogy” and its implications for teaching and research.

This book is quite timely as we have recently witnessed around the world numer-

ous populist, extremist, and antidemocratic governments and interrelated social movements. In this context, the book encourages readers to reconsider how and why some people lose trust in democracy and how people can better live together in a genuinely democratic way. In particular, Heggart (2020) argues that democratic societies like Australia need an empowered, engaged, and educated citizenry in order for democratic institutions to serve disadvantaged people rather than leaving them

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behind. Many would agree with this statement, but the question remains of how to cultivate empowered, engaged, educated citizens through civics and citizenship education. Here, Heggart begins by emphasizing that “the problems that citizens are going to be required to face, now and in the future, are complex,” and thus, “educational practices should engage with notions of complexity in order to better prepare people for those situations” (p. 5). In relation, Heggart points out that many previous and current civics and citizenship-related educational programs are deemed to fail because they are based on a “thin” approach to civics and citizenship education, which uses a simplistic understanding of citizenship, emphasizes content-based curricula and didactic pedagogy, and is “inadequate to prepare young people to deal with complex and wicked problems” (p. 6). This thin approach, as illustrated in models such as *Discovering Democracy and Values Education*, is said to be didactic, top-down, and government mandated.

In the book, Heggart (2020) does not just criticize traditional thin frameworks of civics and citizenship education but also argues for his alternative of justice pedagogy. According to Heggart, justice pedagogy is based on complexity theory (i.e., it is self-organizing and has distributed decision-making and emergent learning), and it provides for a “thicker” approach to citizenship education that can foster “new structures and contexts that will encourage the flourishing of a more equitable and empowering pedagogical space” (p. 225). Justice pedagogy has six core features, which he also elaborates in detail: student-led learning, action-oriented learning and participation, experiential education, school community partnerships, critical literacy, and advocacy for systemic change. These six features interact with each other, and the resulting interactions affect the concept of justice pedagogy as a whole. Heggart applies these features to his Justice Citizens project to provide an illuminating example of the potential of his recommended approach.

Heggart (2020) acknowledges that justice pedagogy is influenced by some other thick approaches to civics and citizenship education, including school-community partnerships, action research projects, critical pedagogy, social justice pedagogy, reconciliation education, and social media-based programs. However, he differentiates justice pedagogy from these other approaches by noting that justice pedagogy extends and develops the other approaches in important ways by foregrounding the notion of justice as central, having a more wide-ranging scope, and being more structured. For example, Heggart says that justice pedagogy is more effective than critical pedagogy because it goes beyond the Frankfurt School of critical theory and connects it with new theoretical perspectives (i.e., complexity theory and complexity pedagogy).

Activist Citizenship Education has several strengths. Heggart’s (2020) point about changing conceptions of citizenship is important. In today’s world where many people (especially young people) are dissatisfied with the state of democracy and their representatives while the landscape of civic engagement is changing, the traditional Western political liberal framing of citizenship (i.e., being a member of a political community) is arguably out-of-date.

New forms of citizenship have developed in this context that can more effectively respond to the challenges faced in liberal democracies. According to Heggart, these new forms “often privilege direct action and participation over representation and are more global in their outlook than limited to nationalist concerns”; he further classifies them as “active,” “global,” and “justice-oriented” (pp. 2–3). The concept of active citizenship is reflected in the activities of young people involved in social movements, as illustrated in recent years in Australia, the United States, and Hong Kong, who believe that they should not rely on older people to solve their problems. In relation, Heggart believes that active citizenship makes sense of the dual interpretations of young people’s participation in society, as they are seen simultaneously as ignorant and apathetic and informed and engaged. Heggart’s trust in young people is compellingly elaborated here; we agree that the development of greater trust in youth across societies is essential today.

Heggart (2020) also reminds us of the dangers of blindly trusting social media. As he writes, social media is neither “objectively neutral or accessible,” nor “the universal panacea for democratic participation” (p. 3). New approaches to using social media have been fundamental in many recent social movements worldwide, such as Black Lives Matter and the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement. Social media is useful in that it can deliver information quickly and gather a large number of people efficiently. However, there are some important risks involved with using social media. In particular, its capacity to unnecessarily intensify social and political polarization should also be seriously considered in thinking about social media more holistically. In this sense, Heggart invites us to join a timely and vital discussion on social media’s “role and efficacy and what that means for civics and citizenship education as a whole” (p. 3).

Despite the insights of this text, there are also some points in the book that have led us to further questions. Heggart (2020) states that his justice pedagogy, though “familiar to any progressive or humanist educator, or, indeed, critical pedagogues,” can “avoid some of the philosophical and theoretical cul-de-sacs that have trapped critical pedagogues and citizenship scholars” (p. 8). This statement is fundamental to his proposal “to replace the terminology of citizenship education with the term ‘justice pedagogy’” (p. 206). However, it is not entirely clear from the book what these cul-de-sacs are and how justice pedagogy can avoid them in reality. For example, the differences between “student-centered” critical pedagogies and “student-led” justice pedagogy are difficult for us to decipher in a practical context (p. 8). Are the differences between these two terms merely a matter of word choice? More empirical evidence to showcase the difference these distinctions make could be helpful for readers. Similar ambiguity exists in the book’s explanation of the differences between Heggart’s approach and progressive philosophies of education. Heggart is skeptical about critical pedagogies and progressive philosophies, but his understandings of them do not seem particularly consistent with those of their proponents. Thus, his criticisms and usage of terms related to critical pedagogies and progressive philosophies of education may confuse some readers.

That point leads to a more significant issue that made us confused in reading this book. That is, although Heggart (2020) summarizes his justice pedagogy as having six core elements, he does not provide a clear definition of justice pedagogy or fully explain how this new approach is different and better than other thick approaches he identifies (particularly in chapters seven and eight). This leads us to the following question: If Heggart borrows so many ideas from other approaches, then to what extent is his approach really new and in what sense? Unfortunately, this may be an extremely difficult (if not impossible) question for Heggart to answer, given that his justice pedagogy is so fundamentally similar to other thick approaches. For example, many Australian schools and education research bodies have been using school-community partnerships. Social justice education also foregrounds the notion of justice as central and promotes action-oriented learning and participation, as Heggart does. Likewise, social media campaigns have been using media for developing critical literacy and demanding systematic change for a long time (i.e., Boler & Davis, 2021; Jackson, 2014).

These theoretical ambiguities related to the distinctiveness of Heggart's (2020) justice pedagogy make the promise of providing an alternative to replace the terminology of citizenship education less convincing. As Heggart notes, *citizenship education* is an umbrella term that has multiple schools and branches. There is no doubt that his criticisms of some branches (e.g., of being content driven or indoctrinatory) are fair and useful. Yet he risks going too far by generalizing these as limitations to citizenship education in general. In contrast, many core ideas undergirding Heggart's justice pedagogy, such as active citizenship, justice-oriented citizens, and demanding systematic change, have been proposed and shared by other proponents of citizenship education in the past (e.g., Dewey, 1963; Kennedy, 1997; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In this sense, it is likely that many readers will ask if the terminology of citizenship education really needs to be replaced and how exactly justice pedagogy is different than citizenship education. As it stands, we are inclined to identify Heggart's justice

pedagogy instead as another branch of citizenship education. Finally, while we respect and appreciate Heggart's choice of research portraiture in his effort to effectively and honestly interpret his data, we question his claim that research portraiture generally "is more honest in its approach than other qualitative methodologies" (p. 13). Here, we would like to know more about what qualitative methodologies he had in mind, and what he means to suggest or recommend by claiming that other methodologies are less honest.

Nonetheless we would like to reiterate that *Activist Citizenship Education* is a useful book that is rich in details about civics and citizenship education in Australia. Readers interested in civic education issues in the Australian context will find this book particularly helpful. Furthermore, given that many challenges related to civics and citizenship education in Australia exist in other contexts as well, readers in other contexts (e.g., Asia, North America, and Europe) can also use this book as a source for insights and inspiration, though they may at times disagree with solutions given, depending on cultural or social considerations. In this sense, we also have no doubt that this book can raise some meaningful debates about what is at the heart of civics and citizenship education in this new world era and how it should shift and transform in the future.

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