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# Democracy & Education

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## Teaching Democratically.

A Book Review of *Civic Literacy in Schools and Communities*

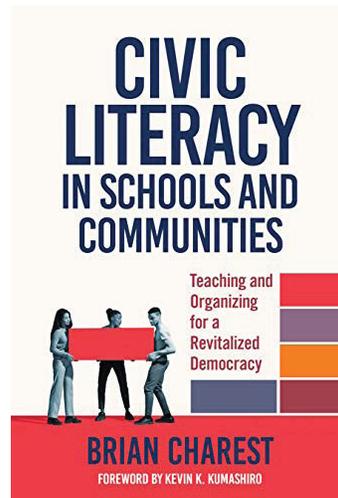
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**O**VER THE PAST several years, “school wars” around polarizing issues, such as critical race theory, school closings, and mask mandates, have galvanized conservative activists across the nation to get involved in school policy—riddled with contradictions and armed with dubious facts about curriculum, school policies, and public health. Through this misinformation and, in turn, mistrust, these interactions can lead to alienating and counterproductive school-community relationships. An added challenge is the role of powerful special interest groups and bad actors who deliberately sow the seeds of divisiveness in pursuit of a narrow agenda, further isolating educators, parents, and most importantly, students from working toward more comprehensive educational and civic goals.

As a result, many K–12 educators and policy makers may want to avoid engaging around these complex and contentious issues with the public, hoping they will magically go away or slide past schools to the next destination. Undoubtedly, undergirding this hope—though not often directly stated—is the belief that schools are technocratic spaces run by specialized experts, immune from the politics of an unruly public. This sense of objective detachment is embodied in many school policies, practices, and reform movements, best represented by the unfortunate quip from former Virginia governor Terry McAuliffe during a 2021 gubernatorial debate: “I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach” (Vozzella & Schneider, 2021).

There is another way schools can understand their public purpose. This alternative may be more difficult and messier, but it



recognizes the undeniable link between education and democracy: namely, a citizen-centered approach in which communities are collaboratively and productively engaged in educating future generations. Drawing on his experiences founding Public Achievement, an international youth civic engagement program, and the broader field of civic studies, public scholar Harry Boyte (2018) has suggested the need for “a larger citizenship movement that prepares teachers to be change agents, or citizen teachers, and creates ‘democracy schools’ as civic

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hubs in the life of communities, strengthening values of culture and community and reinvigorating a democratic purpose for education” (p. 129).

It is toward this pursuit of democratic purposes that Charest’s *Civic Literacy in Schools and Communities: Teaching and Organizing for a Revitalized Democracy* (2021) makes an important contribution. Like Boyte and others advancing civic renewal, Charest aims to build “a new educational movement based on collaboration, coalition building, and collective action across the many social boundaries we encounter” (p. xx). This entails shifting the way society thinks about schooling and the role of teachers so that teachers are asked to collaborate with students, parents, and community members to address the larger societal problems that stop young people from reaching their full potential, such as systemic racism, poverty, and other inequalities. This requires going beyond seeing schooling as a mechanism for individual achievement, towards a world where education is connected to a larger vision for social change.

With this more expansive vision for schooling, *Civic Literacy in Schools and Communities* draws on Charest’s (2021) experiences as a seasoned teacher who now prepares future educators by asking us to see the role of teachers “differently and more democratically” (p. xvi). This means paying attention to the many connections that schools have to local communities—and vice versa. Arguing that traditional education is disconnected from the communities that surround schools, Charest recognizes that the lived experiences of students, including their cultural and community contexts, need to be at the forefront of teaching and learning.

Charest (2021) makes clear something we have noted elsewhere: schools and communities are inexplicably linked and solutions to the problems in each must be addressed by harnessing the many talents in the “the ecology of civic learning” (Longo, 2007, p. 4). Thus, schooling is entangled within a larger ecosystem that includes complex and intersecting social problems as well as a web of community assets which can be tapped for collective learning and problem-solving. This involves recognizing the roles parents, community members, and community institutions play in education (Longo, 2007; Perrotti, 2021). Yet our current education system pays little attention to the intersection of the many configurations of learning. As a result, *Civic Literacy in Schools and Communities* stands out by offering a more comprehensive and reciprocal framework for civic learning that repositions school-community relations towards the pursuit of not just individual well-being, but also “the revitalization of communities” (Charest, 2021, p. 12).

With an awareness of his positionality as a white educator who taught in communities of color, Charest (2021) calls for humility, along with a critical analysis of power and privilege in education. He then takes notice of the often-unutilized power that communities can have on schooling and teaching. He offers a useful critique of the technocratic model that silos teachers and rewards narrow individual student achievement (assessed mostly through standardized test scores), while ignoring broader societal contexts. He then offers solutions that draw directly on his frustrations and insights from inside the classroom. Most helpful is

the recognition of relationship building with community members as central to the work of teachers, along with the introduction of community-organizing strategies for doing this relational work, including having one-on-one conversations, holding listening sessions, and engaging in community asset mapping and power analyses.

One challenge Charest (2021) recognizes is that professional teachers—most often white educators from outside the communities they are teaching in—who take on the role of citizen teachers may try to impose their own ideas, “transform[ing] people into our own image of what we think they should be” (p. 116). As a result, these strategies position citizen teachers to learn the art of dialogue to be able to truly listen and value local knowledge. This entails rethinking expertise so that teachers are able to put their “individual experience and knowledge to work trying to achieve collective goals” (Charest, 2021, p. 116).

Despite not providing a specific definition of what he means by “civic literacy,” Charest (2021) presents a number of strong case examples that demonstrate how teachers utilize organizing strategies to engage with communities in meaningful ways, teach for youth civic action, and attempt to reframe the way schools and communities interact. These examples range from offering reflections on his personal experiences organizing a political candidate forum and accountability session with students and local organizers in Chicago that reinforces the importance of “creating opportunities for students to develop as citizens” in their community-based settings (p. 61); to describing a culturally relevant curriculum that asks students, teachers, and community members to study local history and then offer locally generated community tours in which community “becomes the curriculum,” (p. 78); to introducing an innovative small public school in Seattle that shows that “inquiry-based, democratically-run schools” are possible (p. 94).

The practical examples that Charest (2021) presents are useful; however, they are relatively limited in their depth, not matching the larger vision for “citizen teachers” set forth in the conclusion of his book. Thus, the cases would have been strengthened by drawing upon the many youth civic engagement programs in K–12 education, such as Public Achievement or Generation Citizen, well-established projects that give students power to work on self-identified community challenges. Likewise, making explicit connections with established models of school-community collaborations would have strengthened his arguments, including the community schools movement, which has brought together parents, community members, and social service providers to address social and educational challenges for many decades, or more recent innovations, such as participatory budgeting, which is gaining traction in K–12 schools and communities as a model that shifts decision-making about funding directly to students, parents, and community members.

The relatively short book (124 pages) would also have been strengthened by taking the time to explore the subterranean historical movement that sees communities as central to educating for democracy, as it is noteworthy that Charest’s (2021) broader educational vision is not new. While Charest recognizes the

connections between schooling and community development, his approach to education reflects the writings and practice of democratic educators and activists, such as Jane Addams, Elsie Clapp, Septima Clark, John Dewey, Leonard Covello, bell hooks, Myles Horton, and Paulo Freire, all of whom are part of a long tradition calling for “a protest against a restricted view of education” (Addams, 1910/1998, p. 275; Longo, 2007). These educational leaders—among others—lay the groundwork for the shift toward seeing education as connected with the civic life of communities.

Still, Charest’s (2021) fundamental insight on reframing schooling so that teachers can recognize their roles as citizens and organizers—though often overlooked—is essential to genuine educational reform. Through his strategies and case examples, Charest demonstrates how citizen teachers can do more than teach about democratic practices—they can actively include such practices in their work. This model of teaching will take more time and re-prioritizing. Teaching democratically involves teaching differently and recognizing that learning takes place within broader contexts, ultimately demonstrating how the work of citizen teachers links “to democratic participation and collective organizing, both in schools and communities” (p. 101).

With calls for teacher education programs to include core coursework on race and ethnic studies, community organizing, and the history of social movements, Charest (2021) recognizes the need to build these ideas into how we prepare future civic professionals. Through our work at College Unbound (a college focused on reinventing higher education through an innovative, personalized, interest/project-based curriculum for returning adult learners), we have seen on a small scale how a partnership with the Equity Institute in Rhode Island is helping teaching assistants who are local leaders get their degrees and transition to classroom teachers. The framework of citizen teachers outlined in *Civic Literacy in Schools and Communities* requires creating even more

pipelines for community leaders to become teachers, with more funding and support for programs that help to create partnerships among K–12 schools, libraries, community institutions, and higher education, using a model that shifts teaching and learning from individual level achievement towards a collective endeavor. A new generation of teachers committed to building relationships and collaborating with students, parents, and community members can tap into underlying concerns about top-down policies seen in divisive school wars and respond to, not fuel, them in more constructive ways. Coming together to educate the next generation of teachers is the essential task of schooling and civic renewal. Charest’s *Civic Literacy in Schools and Communities* provides a helpful framework, strategies, and practical examples to help educators begin to do just that.

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