Democracy & Education

Now Is the Time for a New Civic Education

A Book Review of *Civic Education in the Age of Mass Migration: Implications for Theory and Practice*

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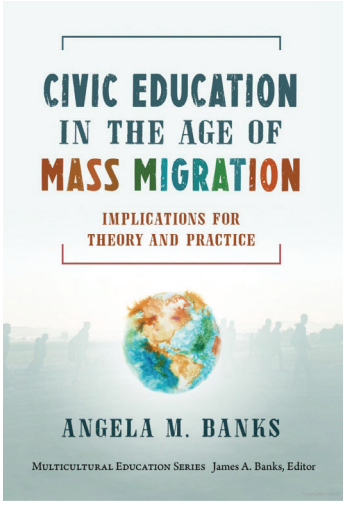

In the days following the violent attempted overthrow of the U.S. Congress on January 6, 2021, news shows and editorial pages filled with calls for "more civics in schools!" Many Americans believed the cure for electoral problems, conflicts around immigration, and a shared definition of what it means to be American could be found in the classroom (Packer, 2021). But what is civic education in an era of hyper-polarization? What is civic education as the effects of several years of pandemic trauma unroll in schools across the United States? Angela M. Banks tackles these questions in her 2021 book *Civic Education in the Age of Mass Migration: Implications for Theory and Practice* by framing them within the context of who our students are and what they bring with them to the classroom.

Banks's (2021) thesis revolves around not simply a new intention for civic education but an explicit redefinition of civic education and its curriculum that includes a critical examination of the boundaries of citizenship. Participation is much more expansive when shaped around the idea of belonging in a community. She argues that traditional civics education relies on assimilationist perspectives because its focus on the definition of citizenship and participation has historically been viewed as an important way to control differences and shape a culture around a dominant set of values (p. 3). Even when civic education evolved to include a more multicultural approach, it remained anchored in the perspective that the point was to engage students in realizing the positive benefits of civic participation in the status quo or understanding the intricate workings of American government systems. Instead, Banks argues civic educators must step outside the old frameworks and interrogate the inequalities that exist because of citizenship boundaries, explore the wide array of "noncitizen" participation opportunities, and learn the human rights that are crucial to noncitizen civic engagement (p. 4).

Banks (2021) focuses on belonging, rather than citizenship, as a key framework shift that civic educators must make when considering how to engage their students in participation and democracy.

> *The goal for civic educators should be to create a civic education curriculum that enables all students to learn about democratic engagement and participation in ways that accurately reflect the various forms of membership operating within society. (p. 18)*

This, then, is the challenge for those of us steeped in years of traditional civic education teaching. We may have tried to reshape the way we teach to be more inclusive of all our students, we may have redesigned our curriculum to focus more on engagement in the community, and we may have even thrown out the word "citizen" in an attempt to create a broader draw to civic

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participation. But have we gone the necessary step of actually interrogating "citizenship," the boundaries that legal membership in our politic require and the gaps in access that exist because of those boundaries? Banks challenges us to consider a critical approach as the truly inclusive way to teach civics. And she does not leave us guessing as to how to make this shift.

In her chapter "The Boundaries of Citizenship," Banks (2021) frames a curriculum approach that goes beyond the traditional de facto and de jure membership identities to the *jus nexi* principle: the social fact of membership or the ties the person has to the community (p. 19). She provides a detailed history and important shifts in education policy that have encompassed the ideas of citizenship membership over the years. Her critical eye provides the model for how to teach this history with an honest exploration of the impact of citizenship policies on society and schools. She then takes the reader into the steps of "redefining membership boundaries" (p. 39). Her argument is that

> *the fundamental principle of democratic governance, popular sovereignty, and the related principle of inclusion are not being realized because long-term residents' basic and fundamental interests are affected by the decisions of the state, yet they are unable to participate as formal members. (p. 39)*

Therefore, we civic educators must explicitly critique this system with our students to better understand how an inclusive society could work for the advantage of all participants. The gaps that exist in the actual practice of our democratic principles are evidenced by the Black Lives Matter movement and students' feelings of disconnect with policymakers over climate collapse and the recognition of rights for LGBTQ+ people. Students see and feel these gaps daily, and our civic education must acknowledge the reality of these failures of democracy, or we are merely reverting to assimilationist practices of touting the interests of the powerful.

Even for civic educators who want to empower their students and create momentum for justice-focused engagement and change, it can be scary to consider an explicit exploration and critique of the idea of citizenship, the limits to our democracy, and the gaps that lie in our democratic principles. Critical approaches to history, to our assumptions about civic engagement, and even to the idea of popular sovereignty could be put under a magnifying glass of scrutiny by those who would prefer civic education be a traditional conveyance of dominant culture values. Banks (2021) counters this fear by providing detailed curricular guidance and examples that include civil discourse, analytical thinking, and creative exercises that allow students to explore the meanings of membership and gaps in our democratic principles and then design ways to engage and act in response to those gaps. She explores events in US history that range from the Chinese Exclusion Act to the current COVID-19 pandemic. The ideas are relevant and adaptable to any classroom.

As a civic educator myself for almost 20 years, and one who has prided myself on a social justice-focused approach, I was deeply challenged by Banks's (2021) call to be truly explicit with my students in a critique of the idea of "citizenship." While the chapter conclusions can be somewhat repetitive of each other, I found that her exploration left me wondering how much agency I truly did grant my students over the years, so many of whom the state defined as noncitizens. Some educators may be concerned about the cognitive dissonance a critical approach might cause students, and the psychological discomfort that comes when assumed identities are challenged. Banks accounts for this with advice on creating a classroom of shared human rights-based values and framing the various activities as opportunities to explore ideas (p. 59).

Banks (2021) offers a thorough rationale for her thesis, and her book contains myriad references and historical background that any novice or seasoned civic educator should consider before launching into another year of the same-old civic education curriculum. Now is not the time for us to shy away from an expansive and sustainable approach to civic engagement and empowerment for our students. Now is the time to take more risks and dive into approaches that will, in the end, strengthen our democracy and democratic ideals by ensuring students (no matter their citizenship status) truly understand that they do belong and matter to the future of those ideals.

References

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Packer, G. (2021, May 15). Can civics save America? *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/05/civics-education-1619-crt/618894/.