

---

# Democracy & Education

---

## Civic Meanings Reconsidered

*Jonathan Ryan Davis and Terrie Epstein*

---

### **Abstract**

In this response, we argue for the importance of understanding teachers' and administrators' beliefs about civic education, as well as how those beliefs may influence teachers' practices. We commend the authors for examining the beliefs of principals and school board members—groups rarely surveyed—but question how their beliefs may affect the teaching and learning of citizenship in schools.

### **This article is in response to**

Lowham, E. A., Lowham, J. R. (2015). Civic meanings: Understanding the constellations of democratic and civic beliefs of educators. *Democracy & Education*, 23(1), Article 1 Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss1/1>

**H**OW DO WE engage in a democracy? What is the best form of civic participation? When and how should we advocate for what we believe in? These are all questions that civics educators must consider—but the answers to these questions will vary based on the background and context of the educator. In their article “Civic Meanings: Understanding the Constellations of Democratic and Civic Beliefs of Educators,” Lowham and Lowham (2015) address this complex reality by demonstrating the various views about civic knowledge and engagement held by various educational stakeholders. Their findings provide an important first step in helping civics educators understand the multifaceted ways in which their peers envision civic education.

As the authors point out, it is important for K–12 educators and stakeholders to “focus on the complexities of [their] subjective belief patterns” (Lowham & Lowham, 2015, p. 2). By becoming aware of the subjective nature of their civic beliefs, they can complicate the concepts and application of civics for their students. For instance, if every educator and stakeholder in a community shared the same ideas about civic knowledge, and conveyed that

vision to their students, they would be doing their students a disservice—the students would have a difficult time should they venture out of that community to a place that harbored different civic beliefs. In other words, it is important for every educator to

---

JONATHAN RYAN DAVIS will be an assistant professor of educational administration and secondary education at the The College of New Jersey beginning in August 2015. He holds a Ph.D. in the sociology of education from City University of New York Graduate Center and an M.A. in social studies education from Teacher's College, Columbia University. Dr. Davis worked previously as a public high school social studies teacher in northern Kentucky and New York. TERRIE EPSTEIN is a professor of education at Hunter College and the City University of New York Graduate Center. She has written extensively on how young people's social identities shape their views of national history and society. In 2015, she was a Fulbright Senior Scholar at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and conducted research on Maori and White students' views of race relations in New Zealand history and society.

complicate the concept of what civic knowledge is to students. As the authors point out:

*Notions of what it means to be a citizen and participate in social and political democracies are complex, changing, and made complicated by the growing reliance on standards and assessment. These changes increase the opportunities for participation, thereby increasing the demands on citizens to learn appropriate forms of and means to participation as well as to act (Lowham & Lowham, 2015, p. 2).*

Because of this increased demand on citizens, educators must be willing to learn diverse forms of and means of participation, which requires access to research like what Lowham and Lowham provide in their article.

The authors focus on understanding one's thoughts about civic education and translating that knowledge to action in the classroom. Using an innovative research design that utilizes a Q-sort to break down educators' and educational stakeholders' responses to questions about civics, the authors were able to develop an interesting framework for how civics educators might contextualize, and thus teach, concepts of civic knowledge and participation. Focusing their analysis of civic knowledge within the distribution of power and responsibility among categories of Elite, Participatory, Neoliberal, and Communitarian, the authors enable educators to articulate to their students the spectrum within which Americans conceptualize concepts like *Knowledge of Rights*, *Managing Difference*, and *the Role of Students* (p. 3).

### **Understanding Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Civics**

There is no denying the importance of learning educators' and stakeholders' beliefs about civic education. However, we disagree with Lowham and Lowham (2015) that there is a dearth of research on the subject. Like Lowham and Lowham, researchers have found that teachers hold a variety of views about citizenship education. For example, a recent study of 155 midwestern teachers found that most held a traditional "personal responsibility" view of citizenship, although some adhered to liberal views that emphasized freedom and rights over responsibility, as well as social justice orientations, where teachers viewed citizenship education as a means to transform society toward greater equity (Patterson, Doppen, & Misco, 2012). The diversity of views among practicing civics educators has been corroborated by other studies (Anderson, Avery, Pederson, Smith, & Sullivan, 1997; Rubin, 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and similar findings have been reported in studies of preservice teachers (Barchuk & Harkins, 2010; Castro, 2013; Gallavan, 2008; Martin, 2008). While the authors provide a good addition to this discussion, especially in relation to how administrators and school board members think about citizenship, it would have been useful for the authors to have situated their study within the existing literature.

### **Analyzing the Methods Used**

If the authors intend to provide educators with applicable information about civic education that they can take to their classrooms, it is important for them to expand their study to a more

representative sample. As they only examined two school districts with fairly homogenous populations, it is unclear whether their findings might apply to different communities across the country. Additionally, the sample only included more experienced teachers, while nationally there is a vast amount of young, inexperienced teachers in the classroom (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). It is important to include these individuals' voices in such a study because they represent a large percentage of the teaching force and because there is a direct relationship between one's age and one's political beliefs—people tend to become more politically conservative as they get older. Therefore, before the authors' work can be applied to civics classrooms nationally, they must expand the scope of their study to incorporate the diverse populations that make up our nation.

It is also interesting how the authors place such a strong focus on the beliefs of school board members and administrators. There is no denying the impact that administrators and school boards have while shaping the systems and organizations that influence schools and their classrooms; however, school board members and administrators often at best have an indirect effect on students' civic knowledge, skills, and beliefs, once civic education is included as a school subject. If the authors could better justify their inclusion of school board member and administrator participation in the study in relation to student civic knowledge and engagement, then their inclusion of these participants would be more meaningful. However, they offer no research or evidence that establishes a relationship between the civic beliefs of administrators or school board members and those of students in the districts in which the administrators or school board members serve.

### **Applying the Findings from the Q-Sort**

The authors state, "We believe it is likely very important that students are exposed to a variety of these belief structures. We believe that such exposure is more beneficial if participants know and understand how those beliefs differ, turning those differences into teachable moments" (Lowham & Lowham, 2015, p. 2). While the authors acknowledge the need to apply the findings about stakeholders' beliefs about civic education to its application and practice in the classroom, it would be useful for the authors to explicate what types of "teachable moments" they anticipate occurring. With one or two examples of such moments, readers will have a clearer sense of how the authors' findings can have a direct impact in the classroom setting.

We believe that the findings could be used to create a rubric of different forms of civic knowledge and application (similar to the authors' Table 1). This rubric could be used to expose educators to different types of civic engagement, which they could then use to expose their students to a variety of ideas—not in a high-stakes, evaluative way like the Danielson framework has been used. What is most important is helping students discover how they can engage in society, not how the teacher believes they should. As Hess (2009) found, teachers' civic beliefs do not strongly influence the civic beliefs of their students. Therefore, it may be more important that teachers learn about as many orientations to civic knowledge and

engagement as they can in order to inform their students in the broadest possible way.

### **Breaking Away from the Concept of a “Traditional” Civics Classroom**

The authors suggest that there is a traditional civics classroom that focuses on the acquisition of civic knowledge and not the application of that knowledge. From our personal experiences of working with civics teachers, preparing preservice teachers to become social studies teachers, and reading the work of several civics educators, it is clear that there are numerous models of civic education that incorporate the integration of hands-on experiences for students. If one hopes to effectively integrate and apply the findings of work like that of Lowham and Lowham (2015), it is critical to not assume that practical work is lacking in civics classrooms nationally. Instead, it would be useful for civic education researchers to provide models and examples of how findings from Q-sort and other analyses can inform and be applied to diverse types of classrooms—those that focus more on project-based learning and those that do not.

### **Conclusion**

Lowham and Lowham’s (2015) article, “Civic Meanings: Understanding the Constellations of Democratic and Civic Beliefs of Educators,” continues an important dialogue about complicating educators’ understandings of civics. The next, and most important, step is asking how we can use this knowledge to better prepare our students to enter our complex, nuanced, diverse democracy. The nature of our educational system is quickly changing, and with it, the political dynamics within our country. To keep pace with these changes, we must start to think about how our subjective perspectives on civics can be used to expand rather than to diminish the civic knowledge and participation of future generations.

### **References**

- Anderson, C., Avery, P. G., Pederson, P. V., Smith, E. S., & Sullivan, J. L. (1997). Divergent perspectives on citizenship education: A Q-method study and survey of social studies teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(2), 333–364.
- Barchuk, Z., & Harkins, M. J. (2010). Why teach globalization? Pre-service teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and challenges of teaching globalization issues. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 5(1), 13–23.
- Castro, A. J. (2013). What makes a citizen? Critical and multicultural citizenship and preservice teachers’ understanding of citizenship skills. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 41(2), 219–246.
- Gallavan, N. P. (2008). Examining teacher candidates’ views on teaching world citizenship. *The Social Studies*, 99(6), 249–254.
- Hess, D. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. New York, NY: Routledge Press.
- Lowham, E. A., Lowham, J. R. (2015). Civic meanings: Understanding the constellations of democratic and civic beliefs of educators. *Democracy & Education*, 23(1), Article1. Retrieved from <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss1/1>
- Martin, L. A. (2008). Elementary and secondary teacher education students’ perspectives on citizenship. *Action in Teacher Education*, 30(3), 54–63.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2014). Schools and staffing survey. Retrieved on November 15, 2014 from [http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass1112\\_2013311\\_dis\\_006.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass1112_2013311_dis_006.asp)
- Patterson, N., Doppen, F., & Misco, T. (2012). Beyond personally responsible: A study of teacher conceptualizations of civic education. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 7(2), 191–206.
- Rubin, B. C. (2007). There’s still not justice: Youth civic identity development amid distinct school and community contexts. *Teachers College Record*, 109(2), 449–481.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen: The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237–269.