

What Kind of Citizen? (Joel Westheimer)

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Review of

What Kind of Citizen?

by Joel Westheimer. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2015

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The message of this short and accessible book is that it is vital for schools to resist the pressures of standardization and offer educational spaces where young people can learn about what it means to be a citizen in a democratic society. There is no peddling abstract truisms here, however. Westheimer brings his message back from extensive experience as an educational researcher investigating how teachers strive to achieve the elusive ideal of education for democratic citizenship in schools and communities across North America. Aimed squarely at an audience of educators wondering how to do the same, the book offers no simple formula for implementation but something far more valuable: competing models to consider, pitfalls to avoid, obstacles to overcome, and ambiguities to contemplate. Education for democratic citizenship is as messy as democracy itself and the beginning of wisdom in citizenship education, it seems, is to embrace this.

What makes the book so readable is its clear narrative structure. Westheimer has managed to turn a work that essentially reports the results of a research program into a hero myth. The story begins, exactly in accordance with Joseph Campbell's schema of the hero's adventure, with the sense that something crucial has been lost or stolen. The main character then goes off on an adventure and comes back with a message of how to recover it. The thing that is lacking, or at least under threat, is a strong commitment among educators to the idea that one of the key purposes of schools in democratic societies is to teach students how to think critically and ask hard questions about important social issues. In Westheimer's narrative, the source of this threat is clear: the standardization of teaching and learning under policy frameworks like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. The pressure to focus on preparing students to do well on standardized tests narrowly concerned with assessing literacy and numeracy skills has pushed to the margins of the curriculum subject matter that encourages young people to think for themselves, question social assumptions, and consider how society can be improved. The adventure itself was a research initiative, conducted in collaboration with the ally figure Joe Kahne. The project aimed to document the meaning that contemporary educators assign to the educational task of teaching how to be a good citizen and the strategies they have devised to promote good citizenship in schools in the face of weighty pressures to "teach to the test."

Westheimer and Kahne found that educators tend to gravitate towards one of three distinct conceptions of citizenship education, each of which is defined by a set of underlying assumptions about the "kind of citizen ... we need to support an effective democratic society" (p. 38). The first kind of citizen is the personally responsible citizen. Associated by Westheimer with the character education

movement, the personally responsible citizen is essentially an honest and law-abiding person of good moral character who helps those in need. The second is the participatory citizen. This kind of citizen shows leadership in addressing social concerns and uses knowledge of local institutional structures to organize collective efforts to pursue some social good: a cleaner environment, poverty relief, improved health services, etc. In Westheimer's typology, the participatory citizen is identified with so-called "service learning," which endeavours to engage young people in public life by having them first identify a pressing local issue (e.g., a park spoiled by graffiti, a polluted river, insufficient after school activities for teenagers) and then collaborate with local government and businesses to effect positive change. At once more cerebral and socially engaged, there is, finally, the social justice-oriented citizen. Critical of Band-Aid solutions, the social justice-oriented citizen seeks to understand the root causes of social problems and, inspired by the history of social movements, works to challenge the social, political and economic systems responsible for social injustices. The educational program presented in the book as typifying a concern to promote social justice-oriented citizenship is the Bayside Students for Justice initiative, where students are led to recognize a particular injustice in their lives or communities (e.g., purchasing clothing produced by companies that use child labour), collectively research the complex causes of the injustice, and devise and implement a strategy to counter it through popular education, solidarity building, lobbying, and other varieties of activism.

Given this description of the three kinds of citizens and their corresponding educational responses, a certain hierarchy reminiscent of developmental theory is apparent. While Westheimer is cautious not to go too far down the road of explicitly recommending education for social justice-oriented citizenship over education for participatory citizenship, he clearly regards education for personally responsible citizenship as chimerical. The argument is simple and compelling. At the outset of the book, the author makes it clear that what he went out to discover in the research project were forms of teaching and learning that are internally linked with values and principles widely considered to define democratic societies— notions like political participation, equality, and respect for fundamental rights and liberties. The trouble with school programs that prioritize the promotion of personal responsibility is that they fail to pass this basic test. "Government leaders in totalitarian regimes," Westheimer writes, "would be as delighted as those in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship" (p. 45). Public service and voluntarism are of course all well and good but because they do not invite young people to challenge the status quo and think about why the social problems such initiatives seek to address exist in the first place they simply do not constitute education for democratic citizenship, as Westheimer understands it. As for the relationship between social justice-oriented citizenship education and education for participatory citizenship, Westheimer states that "different democratic values are embedded in these efforts. Both [are] effective at achieving goals that [are] consistent with their underlying conceptions of citizenship" (p. 63). Reading the detailed accounts of different programs that aim to prepare "thoughtful, active and democratically engaged citizens" (p. 69) provided in chapter 8 of the book, we see that he is not simply being coy. All three of the programs described here—the El Puente Academy initiative, Project V.O.I.C.E./Spanish 511, and The Overground Railroad—seem to integrate both participatory and social-justice elements, suggesting that the distinction is best understood as an analytic tool for teasing apart different aims that contemporary citizenship education pursues and not mutually exclusive categories.

My reservations about the book relate more to what it leaves out than what it includes. To create such a short book (the main text is scarcely one hundred pages long), clearly, some difficult editorial decisions had to be made but the desire to make the book accessible to a wide readership of educators seems at times to have impaired better judgement.

First, the book is completely bereft of information about the methods or results of the research on which the book's narrative is based. Stripping down this kind of material increases the readability of a text, to be sure, but in this case it was done so radically as to be condescending, particularly when one considers that educators are increasingly expected to take the results of educational research into consideration in professional decision making. To illustrate, at one point in the book, following a lengthy presentation of two programs intended to exemplify education for participatory citizenship and social justice-oriented citizenship respectively, the reader is told that it "it is up to you to decide" whether one program is more effective at educating citizens than the other. In the absence of any information whatsoever about the standards the researchers might or might not have used to assess "effectiveness" or the results of the attempts to evaluate the programs in relation to such standards, how exactly is one supposed to decide? The real danger in assuming that educators aren't interested in the complexities of how to measure the impact of an educational program and looking at the hard data—or, worse, that they are not equipped intellectually to deal with these things—is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Second, despite the archenemy role assigned to the standardized education movement in Westheimer's story, a balanced, contextualized discussion of the educational context in which it emerged, and the educational injustices it is intended to address, is conspicuously absent. Even the chapter titled "How did this happen?" does not really answer its own question but instead continues the diatribe begun in the previous two chapters about how the standardization movement encourages an emaciated view of the purposes of schooling in democratic societies, leads to reductivist thinking about educational issues and policies, and erodes teacher professionalism. Although I couldn't agree more with Westheimer's assessment, I can easily imagine thoughtful readers asking themselves, if the assumption that educational standards are conducive to quality education is so misguided and yet so "uncritically and universally accepted" by school reformers (p. 84), how could so many people be so thoroughly wrong? In opposition to its own good advice to examine the root causes of social problems and seek to understand their context and social meaning (p. 23), however, given the book's one-sided treatment of the standardization movement, it would be hard not to conclude that it is nothing other than collective madness. This is ironic because if ever there was an issue of social and communal concern that impacts the public lives of the intended readers of this book and the young people they work with, and calls for the kind of rich, informed and engaged thinking this book urges, this is it.

Nevertheless, *What kind of citizen?* is a model of educational knowledge translation. It tackles an issue that is of genuine concern for many educators but thoroughly rejects the mindless reflex, all too common in educational research, to use the tools of social science to trumpet some preferred approach, intervention or program. Westheimer understands that effective education for democratic citizenship depends more than anything on real teachers in real schools rolling up their sleeves and getting at it and that what will inspire them most is seeing how other educators are doing it. It is the free flow of information between *teachers*, in other words, that will advance the cause of citizenship education most. Facilitating this exchange is what this book is all about.

About the Author

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