

What Kind of Citizen?

Educating Our Children
for the Common Good

Joel Westheimer



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Introduction

The only time I remember my mother speaking directly, and with great sadness, about leaving Germany on a *kindertransport* at the age of 10, was when I was back in Frankfurt with her some 40 years after it happened. I was 19 or 20 years old. We were waiting for a train together in the Frankfurt *Hauptbahnhof* (central station). I saw her look at a platform adjacent to the one where we were standing, and she said, “That’s where I waved goodbye to my mother and grandmother—it looks exactly the same.” And, indeed, it did. From both photographs and history books, I knew that although the allied bombing of Frankfurt destroyed much of the city, the central train station suffered only broken windows and minor damage. Only the advertising looked different. My mother remembers smiling while she waved goodbye so that her mother would not cry. She also remembers giving her favorite doll to the girl seated opposite her who was disconsolate. They were 2 of the 100 girls and boys on the train headed to relative safety in Switzerland. It was the last time my mother would see her family.

Just as I was beginning to write this book, I was asked to write a short intellectual autobiography exploring how my life experiences influenced the scholarly work I chose to pursue. It was a challenging task. Anyone who has attempted to put life experiences onto paper (or screen) knows that it too easily strips those experiences of their vitality and meaning. Yet pen and paper (keyboard and screen) are the tools of my trade. They are imperfect tools, but they are the tools I have. And so I opened the autobiography with my recollections of that moment on the train platform in Frankfurt, not because it was the first experience, chronologically speaking, that shaped my scholarly endeavors, or even the most important one. I started there because, although my parents—both German Jewish refugees—spoke relatively little about their experiences during World War II, I suspect that the intellectual and emotional lineage I inherited was shaped by the profound injustices that informed their childhoods.

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This book asks you to imagine the kind of society you would like to live in and shows how schools might best be used to make that vision a reality. Although the topic is highly political (school reform always is), it is also deeply personal. It has been

said that we don't choose areas of intellectual inquiry, but rather, they choose us. I'm willing to bet my work in education, citizenship, and democratic community is the aboveground product of scholarly concerns with deeper roots. For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in the ways people treat one another, learn from one another, and live together in communities, local, national, and global—in short, how people see themselves as citizens. Education has always provoked my deepest passions, not because of the debates about passing fads and strategies (phonics versus whole language, new math versus old math, small classes versus big classes), but rather because choices about how we teach our children are choices about the kind of society we believe in and the kind of people we hope will emerge from our schoolhouse doors. Will they be concerned only with their own individual success and ambitions without regard to the welfare of others? Will they learn how to develop convictions and stand up for those convictions if and when it becomes necessary to do so?

Since you're reading this, you're probably interested in what schools might teach young people about being a citizen—a member of society—and what that society could look like if schools got it right. When we think about what schools should teach and how they should teach it, we quickly become tangled in the long and complex history of school reform and the contested role of education in democratic societies. In other words, "What kind of citizen?" is neither just an "academic" question (interesting in theory, but of little consequence to real life) nor an abstract one. It's a real question with real consequences for the kind of society we hope to create.

I've worked in many different educational environments in the United States, Canada, and abroad, as a teacher, camp director, youth organizer, and professor of education. Wherever I've been involved, I've become increasingly convinced of the importance of attending to the ways in which the educational program and its staff and participants think about civic communities and the people (or citizens)

that comprise them. What kind of citizens does this institution hope its participants will become? When I ask teachers, students, parents, principals, and even school superintendents to tell me about their ideal school, the places they imagine are always vastly different from the images of schools conveyed by, for example, the standardized-testing industry, or politicians and school reformers focused on international “competitiveness.” Much of the research I will tell you about in this book, placed in its broadest context, focuses on why this discrepancy is the case and what we can do about it. Teaching about citizenship is not solely the purview of social studies or a civics education class. The entire school is part to the enterprise.

What does an ideal school look like in your mind? What lessons are being conveyed? How are children and teachers interacting? What kinds of responsibilities are students being asked to take on? What vision of the “good” society is this school asking students to imagine? Are they learning to think about the kind of society *they* want to live in? Are they learning the skills and habits they would need to help bring that society into being? Are they learning to recognize injustice and work with others in their communities to diminish it? These are the questions that are considered in the chapters that follow.

I prefer to think about schools, not as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge (though they are that too), but as places where children learn about the society in which they are growing up, how they might engage in productive ways, and how they can fight for change when change is warranted.

Schools have always taught lessons in citizenship, moral values, good behavior, and “character.” Even before there was formal schooling, informal education was replete with these kinds of goals. Contemporary schools inevitably teach these lessons as well. For example, schools teach children to follow rules, and to be sure, sometimes following the rules is necessary. But does being a “good” citizen ever require questioning those rules? What is the proper balance between rule following and thinking about the origins and purpose of those rules? We can imagine classrooms that aspire to that balance. But just because schools teach children about citizenship and character, doesn’t mean they always do it well or even toward admirable aims. In fact, schools and other youth organizations have been enlisted in some of the worst forms of citizenship indoctrination as well. Counted among the many examples of organized “citizenship” education are

the hateful lessons learned by members of the Hitler Youth brigades who were the same age as my mother when she boarded the train to Switzerland.

My goal in writing this book is not to convince you that schools should teach citizenship—because that is a given. I write this book because, knowing that schools are always instruments of citizenship education, it seems vitally important that educators, policymakers, and parents—anyone who cares about education and society—ask not whether schools should teach citizenship but rather *what kind* of citizen our educational programs imagine.

I hope that after reading this book you—like me—are left with the sense that schools, beyond teaching children how to read and write, do math problems, and understand science and history, also serve as an inevitable influence on young people's view of the world and, therefore, are a potentially powerful tool that can shape our society for the better.

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