

Civic Education in the Elementary Grades

Promoting Student Engagement
in an Era of Accountability

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Foreword by Meira Levinson



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Civic Engagement in an Elementary Setting

At Dewey Elementary* 450 students file into a multipurpose room in a U-shape singing "This Land Is Your Land." At the center of the room, 22 1st-graders eagerly await their chance to make a presentation to the school's All-School Assembly. Run by 5th-graders, these weekly, schoolwide assemblies serve as a platform for students to present projects to the student body, create a sense of school community, and gain leadership experience.

When the students are settled, the 1st-graders make a presentation about Earth Day. The group ends by saying, "Every day can be Earth Day here at Dewey!"

Taking the microphone, a tall, 1st-grade girl asks, "But I am only one student; how can I help?"

The girl passes the microphone to the next speaker, a brunette girl in a floral skirt. She announces, "Our class made a plan, and you can also be that one student that helps."

As the 1st-graders pass the microphone down the line, they compute the number of paper towels their class alone used during the school year. The final number: 38,232 paper towels. A murmur ripples through the room.

The 1st-graders then begin to pile up the boxes of paper towels that represent the number of paper towels they use in an average school year. The hum in the room grows. Stacked two high, the boxes extend all the way to the end of the line of 1st-graders.

A tall boy announces that his class has committed to using only one paper towel per hand washing.

Another 1st-grader asks, "I am only one student; how can I help?" Inviting the audience to look at the stack of boxes, another student tells the school that they can save more than 120 boxes of paper towels during the school year.

"That is the equivalent of 477,900 paper towels a year," a girl announces. She passes the microphone to a classmate who exclaims, "By using only one paper towel to dry our hands, we could save more than 2,800 trees a year!"

One last 1st-grader takes the microphone. "Dewey Elementary, do you think that you could join us in using only one paper towel to dry your hands? This will save 2,800 trees!"

From that day, Dewey indeed reduced paper towel use significantly. Stickers made by this group of students remain affixed to every paper towel receptacle, asking

*All names in this book are pseudonyms, including teachers, students, principals, and other identifying organizations.

Civic Education in the Elementary Grades

students and staff to “only use one.” The school, led by the principal and several committees of students, has moved toward a goal of becoming a “waste-free school,” which they met in 2015. Inquiry projects about the school’s environmental footprint abound in the past 3 years based off this moment of civic engagement.

Dewey Elementary School teaches children how to make a difference. Dewey offers a laboratory for studying civic engagement, a rare example for elementary schools in an era of testing accountability (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008). Part of the mission of American public schools is providing opportunities for civic engagement, including teaching how young people can participate and question public ideas in their schools and communities. In a time of narrowing educational goals and within the constraints of a culture of accountability, this book offers an active model of civic engagement that can begin in students’ first experiences of schooling. It explores these questions: In what spaces can civic engagement be fostered in elementary schools, given a narrowing of focus in U.S. curriculum, especially at the elementary level? How can a civic engagement focus influence a school’s vision, school activities, and outcomes for students?

Research suggests that children in the elementary grades should have opportunities to learn how to develop civic habits and skills that can lead to active participation in society (Hahn, 1998; Torney-Purta & Lopez, 2006). Even so, the majority of U.S. schools fail to provide an education for engaged citizenship (Kirshner, 2004; Larson, 2000), especially at the elementary level (Boyle-Baise et al., 2008).

In marked contrast to European nations, the United States lacks any formal policy to spur youth participation. Youth participation in European nations, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia has been reinforced by formal policies and national educational structures. Influenced by Articles 12 through 15 of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), youth participation is defined as a series of rights, including access to information, expression of views, and freedom to form collective organizations (United Nations, 1989).

The CRC highlights the need to bolster the capacity of young people and adults to enable child participation and the need for strong standards and accountability to guide this process, and European policies have aligned with these goals. Although the democratic foundation of the United States rests on the idea that participation is a fundamental right of citizenship (Ochoa-Becker, Morton, Autry, Johnstad, & Merrill, 2001), many U.S. policies actually inhibit the voices of young people. For example, in Pennsylvania, it is illegal for young people under the age of 18 to serve on a voting decisionmaking board. With Somalia ratifying the treaty in 2015, the United States is soon to become the only nation in the world that has not ratified the CRC.

In today’s era of academic accountability, schools are spending less time fostering democracy and civic engagement (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010), especially at the elementary level (VanFossen, 2005), than they have done in the past. Recent national policies may have opened a window of opportunity for refocusing on the civic learning as part of academic learning. The initial Common Core State Standards (CCSS) released in 2010 largely ignored civics and social studies, integrating these subjects

into the English language arts standards. The Common Core document called the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework offers an expanded vision of civic and social studies standards (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). Although social studies and civics remain untested in most states and therefore likely will be left untaught, the C3 framework provides modes of applying democratic processes and establishes a strong stance on inquiry, including the value of questioning, use of evidence, and taking informed action.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

This book is based on the premise that civic engagement should remain at the heart of education in U.S. schools. We define the concept of civic engagement as a particular form of agency—a way in which young people take individual or collective action that works toward improving identified issues of concern in a classroom, school, or community. Such activities can show young people how to make a difference in both their own lives and the lives of others (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

Within and across classroom spaces, we frame civic engagement as ongoing, process-based, and dialogic, more than simply a “value of the week” approach or an emphasis on the “right” answer. Instead, we view civic engagement as purposive and critical—a way to encourage young people to examine their environment, to notice and question injustices, and to take action to make things better. Students can learn to participate in their community and also to take responsibility to push for changes when they observe injustices. Students can develop a growing awareness of the needs of others and social responsibility. Students become aware of injustices, and they can seek civically responsible roles in which they consider how to take action.

Such a critical focus on making a difference pushes against the individualistic tendencies of civic educational practices. In a critical construction, civic engagement includes an examination of power relationships and a responsibility to consider how to take action to address injustices (Levinson, 2012). Rather than viewing individuals as isolated with “a predefined set of knowledge, skills and dispositions” (Biesta, 2007, p. 740), we emphasize democratic action in relation to others and to society and within the context of a supportive classroom, school, and community. A critical investigation also includes a consideration of who is participating, whose actions are considered worthy, whose voices are heard, and how such a lens may also bring to light ways in which social injustices might be ameliorated or perpetuated. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) outline the differences between civic education orientations that emphasize “making a difference” (p. 61) individually through civic acts and ethical choices, and programs that attend to broader interrogations of structural inequalities, warning that individualistic civic education programs may encourage participatory citizenship but may not encourage analysis of the root causes of social problems. Such an emphasis is not easy, however, and requires a balance between encouraging activities that can

foster positive experiences of change and bolster agency and not sidestepping the investigation of controversial or complex causes and factors that perpetuate injustices and inequalities (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006).

STUDENT VOICE AND CIVIC AGENCY

The role of the student lies at the heart of civic engagement. This book pays attention to the ways in which young people are included in decisionmaking across school settings—often called student voice (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2005) in the literature—while also critically considering how participation may be more possible or recognized for some and not for others. The teachers and students in this book demonstrate ways in which their experiences helped them develop new identities as change makers and sources of support in the school. Such concepts are rarely explored in civic engagement research, and when they are examined, it is not done until the secondary school level (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Lerner et al., 2005; Perkins & Borden, 2003).

Meaningful civic action within schools is rare, but has been shown to improve the lives of young people; students often become re-engaged in the school community and are also simultaneously more attached to their schools (Mitra, 2004). Through such deeper activities, when schools recognize student voice, young people report a stronger belief that they are capable of making a difference in their own lives and the lives of others (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Mitra, 2004). At its best, civic action can lead to whole-school democratic structures and opportunities that model participatory practice (Apple & Beane, 2007; Serriere, Mayes, & Mitra, 2014). These actions can include service-learning (Serriere, McGarry, Fuentes, & Mitra, 2012; Wade, 2008), democratic deliberation to foster understanding of multiple perspectives (Mitra, 2008; Paley, 2009), classroom meetings in an atmosphere of perceived fairness and collective problem solving (Angell, 2004), youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Rubin & Jones, 2007), critical reflection of civic identities (Abu El-Haj, 2009), and youth organizing (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

A CRITICAL SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Instead of a cognitive or developmental frame, this book embraces a critical sociocultural stance (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). It examines the conditions that enable young people to participate in democratic practices, including noticing and questioning injustices, developing critical questions, and examining ways in which structures and norms might leave out some voices and privilege others. Throughout this book, we show how the sociocultural conditions in which civic engagement occurs impact the quality and locus of engagement. We explore how children are active agents in the construction of their lives and

social worlds (Mayall, 1994a). Rather than focusing on “becoming” citizens, we focus on and value the contributions that young people can make in the present day (Serriere, Mayes, & Mitra, 2014). Civic education, from this perspective, is not only about developing skills, knowledge, and attitudes for future participation, but also recognizes and values children as citizens in their own right, with standpoint knowledge about their current social and political communities (Osler & Starkey, 2005). Although these concepts focus on individual student development, for each idea, we stress how these assets are fostered through collective activities and further serve to strengthen the ability of young people to work together.

Previous research demonstrates that when students are given the opportunity for co-construction, they speak of developing shared meaning-making, learning to get along with others, exchanging perspectives, and working across differences (Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Sanders, Movit, Mitra, & Perkins, 2007). Practices presented in this book align with these findings. For example, we will show how philosophical dialogues with kindergartners at this school (discussed in Chapter 2) demonstrate children’s capacity to engage empathically with others, offer reasons in support of their positions in discussion, and imagine beyond their own initial perspectives. The activities were not predetermined. In a spirit of inquiry, the answers offered were provisional and negotiable.

To understand the process of co-construction, we examine the sociocultural contexts that enable and constrain civic engagement, including ways in which some teachers and students might have greater opportunities for and interest in civic engagement activities and others may not. Voice alone does not always lead to engagement. Therefore, we highlight the diversity of teacher and student experiences at Dewey. We acknowledge that “student voice” is not a monolithic concept, but instead a vessel for a range of students’ experiences and interactions. When we examine teacher empowerment, we note that not all teachers shared the same values, beliefs, or goals for civic engagement activities. It is the intersection of beliefs, lived experiences, and contexts in a social space that fosters conditions in which citizens seek to improve their own and others’ conditions, or make a difference. As former elementary school teachers ourselves, we seek to connect with the experiences and perspectives of teachers, administration, parents, and students of education to frame this book in what we know is possible in schools through evidence and data, rather than a romantic vision of what schools could be.

A STRATEGIC CASE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The site of our research, Dewey Elementary, offers a strong example of a “typical” public school—one with curricular and socioeconomic challenges and one that wants to have a vision of education bigger than testing but feels pressure to narrow its curriculum and teach to the test. We also will describe how Dewey Elementary

is unusual in how it responds to typical public school challenges. For 5 years, our research team engaged in extensive longitudinal case study (Yin, 1994) at Dewey Elementary School in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, including conducting more than 450 observations and more than 50 interviews with groups and individual students, parents, teachers, and administration. Appendix A details our data collection and analysis strategies.

With 27% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, Dewey is not seen as advantaged locally; rather, it is a school that educates students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The school struggled with making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) according to the state accountability guidelines and failed to do so one year during our data collection. Even in this context of threat, we describe how Dewey Elementary used that failure as an opportunity for inquiry and re-creating a discourse that supported its vision for education. Rather than succumbing to test pressure, the principal asked parents what should matter in their children's school, making a space to reframe the high-stakes testing discourse that framed Dewey as a "failing" elementary school.

The experiences of teachers, students, and administrators at Dewey offer key insights into how to construct a school focused on "making a difference" in one's school and the broader community (Mittra & Serriere, 2012). At Dewey, critical inquiry-based learning occurs when teachers respond to student voice, most often by encouraging students to explore their environment (and its injustices) through questions. These examples show how one must have agency to be able to make a difference. The inquiry process can facilitate changemaking by fostering connections between questioning injustice and civic responsibility and taking action. At Dewey, such activities often focused on environmental stewardship. For example, students asked: "Why don't we recycle milk bottles in our classrooms?" This question led to data collection on the number of bottles in each room and eventually a schoolwide classroom recycling effort. The student question "Why don't teachers compost their food like we do in the cafeteria?" led to students implementing composting in the teacher break room. In this way, students learned how to identify issues, collect data, and take action. Such inquiry processes created rich learning opportunities and reinforced the idea that the beliefs and opinions of young children mattered. When adults and students collaborate and listen to the voices of young people, they are more likely to set forth with agency, able to influence the actions of others.

Rather than initiating or being catalysts of civic engagement at Dewey Elementary, we positioned ourselves as guides on the side. We, the authors of this book, met as colleagues at Penn State University and soon after were invited to Dewey Elementary for an informal conversation by Principal Shannon. We realized that the three of us had many shared interests and beliefs in education and from there our shared professional work and relationship grew. After that initial meeting, we often attended Dewey functions, where we made casual inquiries about any civic initiatives in the school unfolding or occurring. This approach initially led us to studying the newly conceived Small School Advisories (SSA) initiative, and it later opened doors to many teachers' classrooms and other school