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Where Is Citizenship Education In The Age Of Common Core State Standards?

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Abstract

There was a time in United States history when the central argument for investing in public education was to ensure that voters were sufficiently informed about the issues of the day to make wise decisions: education for self-governance. According to multiple sources, voter ignorance remains a serious concern and this may be a factor in why the political system in the United States is not more responsive to the needs and preferences of the electorate. Based on an analysis of political discourse and educational policy initiatives, this essay argues that democratic citizenship education has been sidelined by the focus on education for jobs and the economy and outlines what a serious focus on education for active democratic citizenship should entail.



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There was a time in United States history when the central argument for investing in public education was to ensure that voters were sufficiently informed about the issues of the day to make wise decisions: education for self-governance. In a letter written in 1786, for example, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised, for the preservation of freedom and happiness...Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish & improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against the evils [tyranny, oppression, etc.] and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.

Jefferson was a contradictory figure in many ways. He was a slave owner who tried on a number of occasions to abolish slavery, for example, and his view of “democracy” was far from fully inclusive and responsive to the needs of a diverse population. Still, Jefferson articulated a high-minded vision for public education, one that remained unfulfilled during his lifetime. And although we might disagree on what such a common education should look like, his impetus and rationale was sound, and those who eventually succeeded in establishing universal public education in the United States retained Jefferson’s rationale for public education: democracy required an educated electorate.¹

Has the Need for Democratic Citizenship Education Disappeared?

Two bodies of evidence suggest that the need for education for effective democratic citizenship remains: 1.) Substantial voter ignorance on basic political issues, and 2.) A political system in the United States that is often unresponsive to the needs and preferences of a large majority of the electorate. In the following sections we discuss these problems. The remainder of the paper, then, will focus on the current state of citizenship education in the U.S., and an argument for more serious commitment to citizenship education, including specific educational recommendations.

Polling Data

National polls have become a routine part of gathering information about the knowledge and opinions of voters. While used primarily by politicians and political groups who hope to represent the interest of constituents, businesses analyzing markets for their products, and profit-generating tools for their creators, polls have also revealed stunning gaps in knowledge among voters about basic facts and functions of government. For instance, a recent poll conducted by the Conquest Communications Group of U.S. voters found that just 17% of those interviewed

¹ We would like to thank Assaf Meshulam for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

correctly answered the question, ‘On average, who pays a greater portion of their income in federal taxes: The middle-class, the upper 1% of income earners, or do you think they both pay about the same portion of their income in federal taxes?’ (Agresti, 2012. The answer is the middle class). In another recent poll, just 38% of respondents answered correctly which political party currently controls Congress. (Pew, 2011, p. 1), and in another poll, just 36% of respondents could name all three branches of government, while 35% could not name a single one (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2014).

One political scientist went so far as to write, ‘That the public is overwhelmingly ignorant when it comes to politics...is a discovery that has been replicated unfailingly by political scientists; indeed, it is one of the strongest findings that have been produced by any social science—possibly *the* strongest’ (Friedman, 1998, p. 397). We argue that the current state of voter knowledge should be a greater concern and priority than it is in education policy today.

Why Should Voter Ignorance Be a Concern?

Why does it matter if voters lack basic knowledge about political issues? Put differently, did Jefferson’s premonitions quoted above come true, and, if so, to what extent? Although a return to monarchy was Jefferson’s primary concern, we would argue that the concentration of political power in the hands of a few is a similar threat to democracy. Further, ignorance of the electorate has enabled this process to continue. Specifically, due to voter ignorance, reason suggests that: 1.) Political leaders are able to misrepresent their own records without being held accountable electorally, 2.) Voters are more likely to vote against their own interests due to misrepresentation of elected officials’ records and particular pieces of legislation, 3) Due to an inability of the electorate to conduct independent research on important legislative issues, voters are more likely to judge candidates and issues based on simplistic or misleading sound bites and appearances, as well as based on party affiliation alone, and 4.) Due to chronic misrepresentation and unresponsiveness of political leaders to the needs of the electorate, or simply to confusion about the political process and issues under consideration, a large number of eligible voters refuse to participate in the political process.

Further, the process of setting the governmental agenda and identifying the decision alternatives within that agenda is linked to the a.) honesty of political leaders within their communications, b.) clarity of the antecedent and consequences of decision alternatives for different sectors of the population, c.) breadth of coverage and the timing of reporting of issues related to the agenda, and d.) sense of connection between the population and their political representatives. Each of these factors impacts the engagement of the population in political, social, and economic concerns that affect society (Kingdon, 1984). A lack of buy-in leads to autonomy for the political representatives and a growth in ignorance for the general population (Almond & Verba, 1963). The role of public education must be at least in part, if not centrally concerned with, supporting the ability of citizens to counteract or resist the ability and tendency of political representatives to seek autonomy through incomplete or misleading information. Or, as Jefferson predicted, ‘...the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.’

Improving Education for Democratic Citizenship Remains a Low Priority

Although voter ignorance poses a problem for democratic government, it does not appear to be on the education agenda of policy makers. In our evaluation of national educational priorities, we reviewed each of the presidential inaugural addresses and State of the Union addresses going back 30 years and found that when education was mentioned, it was mentioned almost exclusively within the context of improving the economy. Recent examples are President Barack Obama's second inaugural address, in which he argued for investment in education and the teaching force, because:

No single person can train all the math and science teachers we'll need to equip our children for the future. Or build the roads and networks and research labs that will bring new jobs and businesses to our shores.

Or, in his 2014 State of the Union address, Obama said: 'Race to the Top...[is] making big strides in preparing students with the skills for the new economy -- problem solving, critical thinking, science, technology, engineering, math.' Schools and education are often topics in political speeches and discourse, but they are valued almost always for the purpose of building a stronger economy, not for the purpose of building a more informed and effective voting public (Apple, 2006; Au, 2011; Lubienski, 2003).

Other strong indicators of the direction of education in the United States are the major pieces of national education legislation implemented over the past several decades: the No Child Left Behind law of 2001, the Race to the Top law, passed as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and the Common Core State Standards initiative, approved and currently being implemented by a majority of the 50 states. Each of these laws places job-readiness at the forefront. Even the mission statement of the U.S. Department of Education itself reads: 'to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.' (US Department of Education, 2014). While these may be worthy goals, the focus on education for democratic citizenship has been backgrounded.

The economic focus of the education agenda restricts the diversity of alternatives available within the realm of accountability and curriculum, and measures of effectiveness and proficiency become indicators of compliance, rather than what Freire (1997) called *Conscientização*. *Conscientização* identifies an outcome that seeks to maintain an attitude of mindfulness, oriented by the realization that every act of identification is also an act of ignorance – of carving out a focus of attention by discarding a multitude of other interpretive possibilities. The hegemonic control of the education dialogue currently characterized by the 'career and college ready' narrative is not accomplished merely because neo-liberalism has achieved consensus on the role and content of education, but also because there has been a capitulation on the part of many education stakeholders within the curriculum dialogue through the adoption of the *laws of the market*. The language of debate centered upon central aims of life, such as plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, self-organization, and ultimately freedom (Havel, 1985). However, these aims have been abandoned in favor of the language of standards, efficiency, utility, and accountability (Apple, 2006; Au, 2011; Lubienski, 2003).

It is not hard to understand why the economy and jobs are placed at the forefront—in addition to being the priority of business leaders, these issues tend to be at the top of the electorate’s set of priorities in poll after poll, although, as noted above, particular constraints mark what is counted as a priority in political discourse. But we must ask, are the costs of an ignorant voting public and a dysfunctional political process worth the price for an education system focused on jobs and the economy?

It would be naïve to assume that there were not powerful entrenched interest groups that profit from particular pieces of unpopular legislation, or legislation that would be unpopular if the electorate understood what, exactly, was in the bill (Chomsky, 2009). And it is tempting to become cynical and assume that change is impossible, that powerful political groups must and will always prevent educational legislation that could produce informed voters. If that is the case, educators and others must at least force their political leaders, and, perhaps more importantly, their colleagues, to admit that this is true. It is crucial to articulate why education for democratic citizenship should be a central purpose for public education in the United States. If democracy-seeking individuals do not act intentionally, then they are abdicating decision-making to others who may not share their values. We want to be clear that we are not arguing that there was a “golden age” of education for democratic citizenship; these problems have never been adequately addressed.

What if Schools Took Education for Democratic Citizenship Seriously?

A serious focus on education for the purpose of democratic citizenship, rather than only for technical skills for the workforce, would require serious effort. But we must be clear that schools alone cannot create a sufficiently educated electorate, as free public schools educate children just until they reach adulthood. In other words, schools should not be the scapegoat for social problems; other institutions, including media and news outlets, colleges and universities, and the set of laws that are currently in place must also be viewed by the electorate, especially throughout adulthood, as sharing responsibility for an educated populace. This is an important point, since there are groups that hope to eviscerate public schooling altogether, given its various deficiencies (Ladner & Myslinski, 2013). For example, powerful advocacy groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), whose motto is ‘Limited Government – Free Markets – Federalism’ asserted in its 2012 Report Card on American Education that ‘More reforms lead to still more research’ (Ladner & Myslinski, 2013, p. 23). ALEC is just one well-known group working within a crowded political field advocating for an even stronger focus on neoliberal goals in education.

Before we consider what a serious focus on education for democratic citizenship would look like, we must first assess what currently exists as part of the standard curriculum in all 50 states: course work on U.S. and state history, and U.S. government, knowing that the curriculum has always been a place of contestation (Apple, 2006; Kleibard, 1994; Tyack, 1974). Every state in the U.S. has standards related to these subjects, and many—though not all—include social studies in their high-stakes testing regimen (Chadband, 2012). Many states and districts also offer or require courses in economics, geography, and world history. Still, these courses are insufficient for effective education for democratic education. There are many ways in which civic education could be improved, but at the most basic level, the problem is a pedagogical one—in order for teachers to teach the knowledge and skills needed to effectively participate in a

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democracy, and in order for students to learn them, they must practice shared decision-making about important topics that affect their lives.

Recognition by educators of the political and cultural implications of their decisions is crucial. Educators must recognize the role they play in the facilitation of democracy and the impact of their orientation toward cultural reproduction, social integration, or personal awareness (Almond & Verba, 1963). Political engagement rests upon the assumption that educators recognize and value their role as inherently political (Apple, 2004).

One educator and theorist at the forefront of this debate is Deborah Meier. In a recent essay, Meier (2009) considered the power of schools, arguing that educators must be students of how students learn—ordinary coursework, followed by examinations of the material is not sufficient:

Am I calling for more civics courses, and perhaps more attention to U.S. history? No. We remember about as much from those courses as we do from those in algebra and trigonometry or physics and ancient history. If we're lucky, information sticks with us until the final exam, and then gradually (or for some of us, quickly) it drops out of sight. Unless we are part of a community, club, or profession in which we continually practice such knowledge and skill, they never become habitual.

We need to create settings in which the young learn democracy firsthand, as we learn most things—by observation and imitation—and then gradually by more formal apprenticeships. This should include time to reflect on practice, read what others have thought, and develop alternative ideas. Schools are uniquely suited environments for this. Who better than adult, well-educated teachers to practice and, by their example, teach democracy? If we don't trust teachers to make decisions about their own craft, how can we possibly claim to trust ordinary citizens to make decisions about matters far beyond their daily experience or skill? When we deprive teachers of a voice and vote—as we are doing today—we teach a lesson, but perhaps not the one we intended to teach: This hierarchical, top-down world that our young people encounter suggests that democracy is not an appropriate form of governance (Meier, 2009, pp. 1-3).

Social studies education represents a primary mechanism for the development of a democratic civic culture. In recent years the move toward emphasizing test scores as the primary outcome metric (Parkison, 2009) has led to a de-emphasis of social studies within the curriculum. In this context, the learning that occurs within social studies classes has become what Dewey (1938) would classify as *mis-educative experience*. Learning that is mis-educative leads students to become sidetracked with meaningless, rote memorization and decontextualized facts while losing sight of the deep learning that could and should be occurring. The loss of this deep, and discipline-based, learning has consequences for the civic engagement of the future citizens these students will become.

In 1963, Almond and Verba indicated a motivating concern for their landmark analytic study on comparative politics with implications for the pedagogy of the social studies:

Though this coming world political culture appears to be dominated by the participation explosion, what the mode of participation will be is uncertain. The

emerging nations are presented with two different models of the modern participatory state, the democratic and the totalitarian. The democratic state offers the ordinary man [sic] the opportunity to take part in the political decision-making process as an influential citizen; the totalitarian offers him [sic] the role of the ‘participant subject.’ Both modes have appeal to the new nations, and which will win out – if indeed some amalgam of the two does not emerge – cannot be foretold. (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 3)

In the 50 years since the publication of this study, the question of how developing nations would facilitate the development of a civic culture has come home as a concern for the United States and other developed nations. Almond and Verba (1963) provided a working definition of a democratically oriented civic culture: ‘... a pluralistic culture based on communication and persuasion, a culture of consensus and diversity, a culture that permitted change but moderated it.’ (p. 6) The implications of Almond’s and Verba’s definition reveal the long-term political impact of social studies curricula. The political nature of the educational process dictates that an awareness of the issues and influences that are at work should be made visible to those stakeholders involved in curriculum and instructional decision-making.

Phenomenological Considerations

It is important to note that the recommendations of Meier, Almond, and Verba, for greater experience in decision-making, contrasts with the call for a standardized national social studies curriculum. While these groups also note the low level of civic knowledge of public school students and graduates and claim that the problem can be addressed by requiring all students to study a particular ‘common core’ of knowledge. The problem with this argument is that there is far too much knowledge that various groups claim to be ‘essential’ to adequately participate in a democracy. Further, these claims ignore the problem Meier points out above—that stating a list of facts and knowledge is only a small part of the educative act. Memorizing a list falls with the realm of educational compliance while denying the opportunity for the development of *Conscientização*. More important is understanding the experiences necessary for students to learn new material, and how to make the relevancy of such knowledge apparent to students, supporting their thirst for life-long learning. While content knowledge is certainly important, the amount of knowledge needed is too great and different communities value different knowledge. Therefore, it is unwise to assume that the whole nation can agree on one body of knowledge that is important for all students to know before graduation, which often leads to harmful sanctions on individuals and schools that focus on a different set of knowledge than what is tested, for example.

Meier’s comments allude to education’s role within society, which consists of establishing a grammar, or calculus, for the negotiation of the norms of cultural politics. It is worth digging deeper into these issues by reviewing the work of theorists who have made arguments about the nature and development of knowledge itself. The political nature of the educational process dictates that an awareness of the issues and influences that are at work should be made visible to those stakeholders involved in curriculum and instructional decision-making. Three central questions are of importance within this discussion: who decides what the desired results of public education should or could be? What pedagogical strategies facilitate meaningful and educative experiences for learners of these desired results? And, how will the emphasis on what ‘works’ in the effort to accomplish these results become legitimated? What

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‘works’ will depend upon what the desired results consist of within the educational process. Success or failure will be determined in relation to the criterion of the desired results. Determining the desired results is an axiological dialogue which does not have any claim to a universal consensus, but the process of identifying the desired results should.

Ludwig Wittgenstein provided a strategy that helps to expose the political choice that is hidden within this axiological dialogue, or hermeneutic cycle. The internal structure of the hermeneutic cycle forms a language game in Wittgenstein’s philosophic system. Asserting that performance on a specified test indicates educational proficiency in relation to a set of desired results on the part of the student and the school. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its successors, Race to the Top (RTT) and the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS), for example, claim a universal, or transcendent, position for themselves and their proponents. The prioritization of this position represents a power grab within the politics of education. Wittgenstein (1974) explained:

It is as if someone were to say ‘a game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to certain rules ...’ and we replied: You must be thinking of board games, and your description is indeed applicable to them. But they are not the only games. So you can make your definition correct by expressly restricting it to those games. (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 57)

NCLB, RTT, and CCSS expressly restrict the discussion of educational objectives, content, and pedagogy by institutionalizing a set of standards within a non-democratic political system. These outcomes are then validated by restricting the assessment mechanism to evaluate achievement of only those educational objectives established by NCLB, RTT, and CCSS. This process effectively limits the pedagogical strategies that are seen as valid within the system to those based purely on shallow, lower-order cognitive development, and within restricted domains of knowledge. These outcomes are all framed within the language game of college and career readiness that is driven by economic concerns rather than the social-political concerns of democracy.

By re-emphasizing the dispositions of reason, reflection, critique, and dialogue, education can address the crisis that has resulted from the institutionalization of an ideological and hegemonic value system that uses the single lens of economic profitability and efficiency. NCLB, RTT and CCSS institutionalize a set of values within a pedagogy that relies upon “scientifically” generated brute data. Neither the values being put forward in the form of content standards nor the legitimacy of research methodologies used to determine the efficacy and appropriateness of pedagogical practices are questioned. The search for the validation of a particular cultural politics based upon the desired results of economic profitability and efficiency becomes of vital importance in identifying the potential for a shift away from the hegemonic structure of NCLB, RTT and CCSS. Shifting from a search for certainty in the form of standardized test performance and the brute data that represent it to a search for agency within a collaborative consensus building axiological dialogue represents the challenge for revising social studies pedagogy.

Perhaps in an effort to avoid these issues, the stakeholders within the educational institutions have opted not to politicize the axiological claims of standardized testing and the epistemological paradigm that rely upon them for verification. In this instance of capitulation, ALEC and its supporters, for example, win without a contest. This process essentially brackets or

backgrounds the issues of cultural reproduction, social integration, and personality and practically complies with the cognitive domain focus of the standardized content.

This political strategy proves futile as the consequent crises emerge regardless of the intentions of the stakeholders. It is also worth considering the intentions of the decision-makers who implement educational policies that rely upon the brute data of standardized testing (Au, 2008; Apple, 2006; Giroux, 1988; Glass, 2008; Saltman, 2012). Again, phenomenology offers a methodology for the consideration of the intersubjective relationships that are contained within standardized schooling and testing. Intersubjectivity carries with it a political dialogue of power relationships that serves as the sub-text of the hermeneutic understanding the dialogue creates. The act here takes precedence over the object. It is the intentional connection of phenomenon to a corporeal existence that creates and maintains an identity (Husserl, 1965).

The ability to make this connection is the source of power within the political dialogue of standardized schooling and testing. The ability to see the connection between brute data and the cultural politics within educational institutions is vital. Young (1990) helps to clarify:

What happens when the curriculum is based on a traditional theory of knowledge? The main features of traditional theory may be summarized as a set of tendencies towards an ahistorical, value-free view of knowledge as a finished product, towards a mistaking of the contemporary surface of things for their full range of possible states and towards a view that critique is not a matter of method, but of personal and nonrational decision. These features also present, but in a tacit and inverted way in traditional theories of the Left as well as the Right. All of these tendencies are reflected in the selection of what is to be taught and in the attitude of teachers towards this content. In turn, this finds an echo in the choice of teachers' methods (Young, 1990, p. 82).

The enduring interest in the world, the axiological politics of what is important and valuable, is what characterizes humankind and grants meaning. Involvement in the processes of creating meaning, which is a political process, through conversations or interpretations of the objectives of educational institutions, is crucial to the creation of an inclusive cultural politics. The student and the teacher must become agents in the communicative process to break the hermeneutic cycle described above.

Concrete Examples of Effective Education for Democratic Citizenship

In addition to being a learning theorist, Deborah Meier is also well-known for having founded several schools in New York City and in Boston that have been closely observed and evaluated by scholars (Knoester, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Bensman, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Aneess, 1994). One of the schools founded by Meier and colleagues is The Mission Hill School in Boston. It is an example of a school that has intentionally placed shared decision-making, inclusion, and communicative action at the forefront. The school is small, only about 220 students attend, so knowing every other person in the school is possible. It is racially and culturally diverse, with a student population of approximately 41.4% Black, 27.8% Hispanic, 22.8% White, 0.6% Asian, and 7.4% mixed or 'other.' (Boston Public Schools, 2013). The curriculum is designed to help students develop five habits of critical thinking to be used in all subject areas. Throughout their matriculation, students are challenged to continually ask: 1.)

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What is the evidence? 2.) Why is this relevant? 3.) How is this connected to what I already know? 4.) From whose perspective am I hearing or reading this? And 5.) How could things have been different? Forming the habit of asking and answering these questions values the skepticism and curiosity that is needed to gather information that may be needed to make important decisions. The school has made a number of other arrangements to prepare students for democratic citizenship, including: routinely placing students in decision-making situations related to do their own learning, democratically participating in class and school meetings, practicing public speaking in front of large audiences on a regular basis, and studying in depth the dynamics of group decision-making and how governing bodies can become more inclusive and responsive to their constituencies. Middle school students take a course called ‘media literacy,’ which challenges students to critically analyze the messages sent by commercial media regarding race, gender, and materialism. And the teachers of the school are central actors in the policy decisions of the school, along with parents and community members on the school’s Governance Board (Knoester, 2012a; Meier, 2002, 2004; Meier, Knoester, D’Andrea, 2015).

While just one example of a democratic school, it offers an illustration of how schools can place education for democracy at the forefront, and it demonstrates by example how far most schools have moved away from this focus. The fact that the school is racially and culturally integrated, for example, points to a value in education that gained momentum after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, but has since been almost completely abandoned as a policy priority (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012; Rothstein, 2013).

Other suggestions for serious democratic education include ensuring that all secondary students have substantial experience on a debate team, where they learn rules for evidence and what counts as counter-point and logic. This experience would allow graduates to clearly see that the argumentation that passes as debate in mainstream political discourse, characterized by name-calling, simplistic slogans, and ad hominem attacks debases our politics and should not be rewarded electorally. Relationships and social interactions that could potentially challenge the status quo or draw attention to the social hierarchies that constrain and define society, are absent from the mainstream political discourse that is presented. Bourdieu (1996) describes this process:

What we have to ask is why these individuals are able to respond in these absolutely particular conditions, why and how they can think under these conditions in which nobody can think. The answer, it seems to me, is that they think in clichés, in the “received ideas” that Flaubert talks about – banal, conventional, common ideas that are received generally. By the time they reach you, these ideas have already been received by everybody else, so reception is never a problem. But whether you’re talking about a speech, a book, or a message on television, the major question of communication is whether the conditions for reception have been fulfilled: Does the person who’s listening have the tools to decode what I’m saying? When you transmit a ‘received idea,’ it’s as if everything is set, and the problem solves itself...The exchange of commonplaces is communication with no content other than the fact of communication itself. (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 29)

If this is the mode of communication to which citizens have become accustomed, then there is an additional challenge to creating the potential for educative communication, one that must be given serious consideration by educators for democratic citizenship.

Hess (2009) made an extended argument for the importance of including communication in the form of discussions about controversial topics in schools, a pedagogy that has potential to break out of meaningless communication as described by Bourdieu above. Hess writes:

The purposeful inclusion of controversial political issues in the school curriculum, done wisely and well, illustrates a core component of a functioning democratic community...When schools fail to teach young people how to engage with controversial political issues, or worse, suppress, ignore, or deny the important role of controversial issues in the curriculum, they send a host of dangerous and wrongheaded messages. One is that the political realm is not really important, especially in comparison to other content on which schools traditionally have focused. Another is that such issues are 'taboo' and therefore dangerous for young people to encounter. Yet another is that people in the United States and the larger world fundamentally agree on the nature of the public good and how it can be fostered (Hess, 2009, pp. 5-6)

Hess detailed the practices of a large number of classroom teachers as they lead their students through discussions of controversial topics, offering analyses of successful approaches to teaching these skills, approaches that create a caring and safe learning environment, while also challenging students to think deeply about questions of evidence and perspective.

Further, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have offered influential analyses of the purposes and content of what democratic education should entail. They theorize three different models of citizenship education: (1) Education for moral virtue; (2) Education for political participation; and (3) Education for justice. Only the third option, education that examines the root causes of inequalities, they argue, can add a significantly positive contribution to political discourse. They write:

If we ask only about personal responsibility (and if discussions of personal responsibility are disconnected from analysis of the social, economic, and political context), we may well be reinforcing a conservative and often individualistic notion of citizenship. Yet this is the focus of many programs and of their associated evaluations. If citizenship also requires collective participation and critical analysis of social structures, then other lenses are needed as well (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 264).

Westheimer and Kahne remind us that effective education for democracy must consist of much more than knowledge about various processes of deliberation and the operations of government. It must also include knowledge and understanding of the various social forces of inequality that continually silence and marginalize particular groups of people while reifying the privilege and power of others. In Freire's terms, *Conscientização*. Fraser's (1996) conception of various forms of inequality is also important here. She separates inequalities based on *distribution*--or inequalities of economic and material possessions and access--from inequalities of *recognition*, or the privileging of various individuals or groups based on race, gender, age, sexual preference, ability, religion, nationality, or location. These forces of inequality are dynamic and difficult to understand, but in order to understand the complexities of how a democratic deliberation might take place, given social inequalities, all participants must think seriously about how these forces operate and how they can prevent a political system from being fully inclusive and responsive to the constituency.

Education and Poverty

Many observers of the education system in the United States have noted that the best way to improve the academic achievement of students is to focus directly on poverty. It is estimated that 16 million children—or 22% of all children—live in poverty in the United States (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2013). The economic conditions of these children affect their learning, no matter what the focus of that learning is. For example, Berliner (2006) wrote:

Poverty places severe limits on what can be accomplished through school reform efforts, particularly those associated with the federal No Child Left Behind law. The data presented in this study suggest that the most powerful policy for improving our nation's school achievement is a reduction in family and youth poverty (Berliner, 2006, p. 1).

Berliner argues that a reduction in family and youth poverty must be a priority. Reason would suggest that problems of poverty would continue to inhibit citizenship education well into adulthood. But we may be facing a chicken-and-egg problem here. What must come first: a focus on fighting poverty directly, or a focus on civic education so citizens can then pressure their political leaders to focus on poverty? We argue that both are important and must be pursued simultaneously. Anyon (2005) suggested specific proposals for fighting poverty:

To remove economic barriers to school quality and consequence, we can legislate a significantly higher living wage; we can create jobs in cities that offer career ladders and prepare low-income residents to fill them. And, like a number of European countries, we can tax wealthy families and corporations to pay for these and other investments. We should enforce federal antidiscrimination measures to integrate segregated housing and create public transit routes so low-income urban residents without cars are not denied access to jobs in the suburbs. Policies like these would create a social foundation on which high-quality schooling would rest. (Anyon, 2005, p. 83)

It is important to note that most of the proposals articulated by Anyon above (especially raising the minimum wage and job creation) are highly popular politically. It is a sign of a lack of responsiveness by political leaders to their constituents that popular proposals such as these are not achieved.

Some theorists, including Anyon, argue that the knowledge and skills necessary for effective democratic participation are not best learned in school at all, but rather as a part of civic engagement. Meier also hinted in the passage quoted above that schools might not be the only or best place to learn the 'trade of democracy.' Anyon (2005) argues that social movements may be the best place to educate for democratic citizenship, not schools. Anyon writes, 'Individual and group identities as agents of change develop not primarily because of educators' use of critical pedagogy or other consciousness raising (as crucial as these are), but because of actual participation in situations of political contention' (Anyon, 2005, p. 11). While this may be true, schools also offer a unique and crucial opportunity for students to learn the skills and knowledge necessary for effective democratic citizenship, even if not ideal (Knoester & Gichiru, 2014).

Conclusion

As Jefferson argued, a highly educated and engaged electorate is the best defense against political domination by a small group of powerful special interests. It is worth continually fighting for and investing in. We do not care to be romantic about the power of schools to change society (Apple, 2012), but schools are important locations for learning skills and knowledge crucial for democratic citizenship. It is clear that large numbers of public school graduates are uninformed and disengaged with political processes and, as a result, unable to hold their political leaders accountable. Forces of inequality and corruption are dynamic and not easily interrupted with pedagogical maneuvers. While much more is required, however, it is important to point out that politicians appear uninterested in addressing these issues and until they do the problems are likely to worsen. In *Teaching the Taboo* (2014), Rick and William Ayers argue, as we have here, that the curriculum in schools has become too narrowly focused on knowledge and skills for subservience to the workplace. They write:

We must, with our students, learn to ask the essential questions again and again, and then find ways to live within and beyond the answers we receive. Who are you in the world? How did you (and I) get here? What can we know? What do we have the right to imagine and expect? Where are we going? Who makes the decisions? Who's left out? Who decides? Who benefits? Who suffers? What are the alternatives? In many ways, these kinds of questions are themselves the answers (p. 125)

And many more questions need to be asked of educators and policy makers. Can education affect policy and the election of politicians? Can the best forms of democratic education overcome the problem of concentrated money in politics? Recent examples in politics suggest that politicians who are greatly outspent by their opponents can win elections, although this is rare. Recent studies show that in 8 of 10 U.S. Senate races, 9 in 10 U.S. House races, and 9 in 10 U.S. Presidential races, the candidate who outspent his or her opponent won the election (Biersack, 2012; Open Secrets, 2008). There is no doubt that money is influential in politics. What can be done to prevent money alone from controlling our nation? Indeed, the concentration of money in the hands of few individuals today represents the rise of the “kings, priests and nobles” that Jefferson warned about more than two centuries ago.

A renewal in education for democratic citizenship is long overdue, as it remains democracy's greatest defense. We cannot allow the serious teaching of social studies become the new taboo in education. Given the entrenched moneyed interests in political leadership, including in state and federal education departments, we fear it must be social studies educators and their allies who push for the invigoration of serious education for democratic citizenship in the United States.

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