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Civic Education and Civic Capacity in Public Schools: The State of the Field and Directions for the Future

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The global COVID-19 pandemic’s social, economic, and health consequences are far reaching, and the pandemic’s disproportionate impacts, coupled with movements against systemic racism, have exposed deep structural challenges in our society. As citizens and policy makers respond to these challenges, American democracy and societies worldwide are at a crossroads. In *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) asserted that “American democracy depends on us - the citizens of the United States. No single political leader can end a democracy; no single leader can rescue one, either” (p. 230). Can we meet this challenge of shared civic responsibilities in a highly polarized polity? Do our schools and other core institutions have the capacity and the will to inspire our children and young adults’ civility and civic purpose? Can we revive civic trust as the majority of our citizens lose confidence in our

governing institutions? Will the next generation of American citizens be ready to exercise their voting rights and free speech? Will inequalities in civic engagement widen in the context of growing economic inequality? Is deliberative democracy fading in the American polity? These issues are at the core of the design, practice, and future of democratic practices in the USA and beyond. The papers in this special issue raise the saliency and the relevance of these issues while suggesting steps that civic actors—whether teachers, researchers, students, parents, taxpayers, or other members of the public—can and do take to encourage greater democratic living.

The worrisome state of American democracy calls for a systematic examination of civic education and civic capacity, the foundational pillars of democratic life. Mounk (2018) found that only one-third of millennials thought living in a democratic society was very important, in comparison to about two-thirds of those born in the 1930s and 1940s. Studies (e.g., CCSSO, 2018) show the narrowing of the curriculum due to high stakes accountability, often excluding or marginalizing civics education. Schools can play an important role in increasing civic engagement generally and decreasing gaps in civic engagement that exist (Levinson, 2012), but civic opportunities are often inequitably distributed within schools (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

In a political context shifting towards ideological polarization (Feldman, Jackman, Ratcliff, & Treier, 2018) and populism (Roth, 2017) and away from transparent and public accountability around the globe, including in democracies, there is increasing interest in reaffirming democratic practices. In the USA, part of the rationale for public schools has been historically (Dewey, 2016) and remains to this today (Gould et al., 2011) is to prepare people to be democratic citizens. Given the longstanding commitment to civic education and the current urgency, this special issue offers a comprehensive, current understanding of the state of the field.

Collectively, this special issue integrates theoretical and empirical work on civic

education, civic capacity, and democratic practices. We view civic education as a set of learning goals shaped by the framework of liberal democracy (e.g., Dewey, 1916; Gutmann, 1987). Particular attention is given to the concepts and practice of action civics (Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2016; Cohen et al., 2018; Pope, Stolte, & Cohen, 2011). Strengthening civic education will contribute to vibrant civic capacity, a concept more commonly promoted by political scientists (e.g., Henig et al., 1999; Orr & Rogers, 2011; Putnam, 2001; Skocpol, 2003; Stone et al., 2001). Civic capacity departs from business-as-usual politics and fosters cross-sector collaboration to address a common challenge at the system-wide level. Examining the connection between civic education and civic capacity highlights inequalities in civic learning and the extent to which educational inadequacy may affect civic engagement, such as electoral turnouts and parental involvement in schooling issues (Orr, Wong, Morel, & Farris, 2016).

This Special Issue

The multidisciplinary group of scholars and scholarly practitioners in this issue examine these topics as they relate to issues across a range of settings in the USA and internationally. Our authors report on work being done at scale with diverse populations and address issues that are particularly relevant to education policy, politics, capacity building, and practice.

Our first paper, by Fitzgerald and colleagues (2021), offers a systematic review of the last decade of civics education research in the USA. Of the 648 studies included in the review, almost 70% focused on civic curriculum, instructional practices, and learning outcomes. Civic skills and capacities and civic identities accounted for only 19% and 14% of the studies respectively. However, the paper found very few studies that incorporated marginalized voices in politics and addressed increasing political polarization. The paper highlights the research needs to support efforts to broaden youth civic participation and decrease political polarization.

The next several papers in the issue focus on civic education and democratic practices in schools. In the USA, Littenberg-Tobias (2021) explores relationships between active learning in civics and students' civic knowledge using NAEP civics data. He found that active learning experiences were positively associated with increases in student knowledge, but the overall effect sizes were fairly small. However, after applying a different method for measuring active learning that emphasized quality not quantity of experience and taking into account potential overuse of activities, the effect size was substantially larger.

DiGiacomo and colleagues (2021) studied teachers' civic education experiences and perspectives in a politically and demographically diverse school district. How teachers conceptualized civic education varied widely, from preparing students to be critical thinkers, to teaching how to be good 'citizens', to showing them how to exercise their voice in civic activities. Sociopolitical contexts and other external challenges shaped how teachers integrated civics into their classes and classroom practices. Importantly, while teachers felt strongly about supporting students' civic development, they lacked systematic support for doing so routinely.

Some papers explored non-profits' work on civic education. McAvoy and McAvoy (2021) studied the Close Up Washington program and reported on the differential polarization of high school students who experience political discussion in deliberative small groups versus debate activities and offer ideas for reducing polarization. The lessons about how discussion strategies impact student polarization are especially important for teachers who engage controversial or contentious issues in what can be already polarized classrooms.

Andes and colleagues (2021) reflect on over a decade of Generation Citizen's school-based programming, highlighting three important qualities for a successful non-partisan program: local focus, diversity, and community and student voice. Their attention to being

political in a non-partisan way is particularly important for pedagogical approaches like action civics, which encourage student voice, agency, and action. This can inform the future of action civics education in schools, regardless of the political leanings of the school's area.

Drawing on anti-racist theory and the knowledge base on community organizing, Kirshner and colleagues (2021) propose a framework for scaling and sustaining justice-centered civic learning. Their theory of change is illuminated by an initiative sponsored by the Denver Public Schools that raised the awareness of students and teachers on injustices and broadened student engagement in action research and policy change. Among the facilitating features on critical civic engagement included teacher buy-in, organizational and content alignment, and student leadership development. Lessons learned from this case study have implications for moving action civics beyond merely a checklist.

We also learn from Cuba and Israel. Dawley-Carr (2021) explores Cuba's K-12 citizenship education model and its current challenges. Historically, Cuban citizenship education, from its organizational structure to its civics curriculum, emphasized work in the planned economy as a central civic duty. With emerging privatization, today's Cuban youth face challenges to meeting this duty. The paper offers in-depth case studies of youth whose lived experiences showed varying education and vocational pathways with shifting civic mindedness.

Cohen and Eyal (2021) study cross-sector alliances—partnerships between public schools and groups outside the formal education system—in Israeli high school civics courses. Interviews with teachers engaged in such partnerships yield valuable insights into how the civic ideology of outside groups intersects with and influences ideas of citizenship presented in classrooms. Cohen and Eyal warn of the potential for cross-sector alliances to reify particular, dominant conceptions of citizenship at the potential expense of marginalized groups.

We conclude with papers focused on civic capacity and democratic practices in school districts. Morel (2021) outlines how civic engagement and the politics of citizenship helped transform the Union City, New Jersey, public schools. He notes that the unique political constituency of Cuban Americans at a time that the state was led by Republicans (who were interested in Cuban Americans as potential Republican voters) offered the school district more flexibility in improving their school system than other districts, which led to sustained improvements. As polarization and politicization worsen across societies, it will be important to put politics aside (and not rely on state politicians deciding that there is political alignment) in order to support community engagement in school system transformation.

Collins (2021) brings nuanced findings to an important question: Who should be in charge of schools? Through a novel video-based survey experiment, Collins questions the otherwise straightforward finding that stakeholders generally prefer school boards over other forms of control such as school-site councils or state and federal bodies. He offers important clarifications about what kind of stakeholder prefers school boards. He also explores evidence and implications of stakeholder desires to engage with school boards directly. School stakeholders want opportunities for community members to engage in the deliberative democratic practice of school board decisions. This finding bodes well for broader efforts to promote democratic practice across the landscape of public schools.

Throughlines

Each article offers an important contribution to the field of civics education at a time when popular discourse around civics, citizenship, and democracy more generally seems despondent. Concerns of polarization, the lack of constructive discourse, and increasing isolation inside partisan “echo chambers” have been particularly visible in recent years and concern all of

us who are committed to the tenets of democracy and the practice of democratic education. We invite readers to approach each article as an exploration of a particular piece of this larger challenge, and hope that readers will engage with the ideas as they exist across and between the separate pieces. There is no single approach that will safeguard the future of civic education and democratic living. Instead, educators at every level must be prepared with the tools and dispositions to support a broad approach to this work.

Three themes across this issue suggest both immediate classroom needs and future goals for educators and researchers: equity, polarization, and the role of curricula and pedagogy in promoting citizenship and civic action. These themes highlight the importance of schools as spaces for developing and practicing democracy in ways that can impact broader communities.

Equity. Many of these articles share an interest in issues of equity, and the different experiences marginalized students may have as both students and civic actors. Working towards equity will include ensuring that all students have equitable access to high-quality civics education in school, and that they also have equitable access to civic engagement opportunities and civic power beyond school as well. As the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates many inequities, including, potentially, gaps in what educational opportunities youth experience, it will be important to closely monitor equity in civic education, civic capacity, and civic life.

Polarization. Schools can respond to the realities of polarization in national politics, and can also model consensus building and compromise and learning across differences, and be part of the solution towards reducing political polarization. Can schools provide a safe space where ideas on democracy and governance can be debated without repercussions? Will schools teach students how to earn and be respected when political discourse occurs? Addressing these issues in our schools will have broad ramifications for our next generation of leaders.

The role of curricula. Whether implicit or explicit, teachers offer certain ideas about citizenship as they craft curricula, or as they transform provided curricula into enacted classroom activities. The pedagogies of citizenship can enable classrooms to serve as important sites for dialogues and deliberations about what democracy means and what democratic participation entails. While we agree that schools are the appropriate venue for such dialogues, we are also mindful of ongoing debates regarding not just types of citizenship but the ways in which curricula open or close discussions of the relationships between teacher, student, and state. We hope, too, that future research will investigate those relationships as they move outside of the classroom, to interrogate the practices of deliberative democracy and voting beyond the school.

Conclusion. We are at a critical juncture: this decade will be formative for supporting democratic responses to overcoming the sizable challenges, including widening inequities, that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent recession. Promoting collaborative (versus polarized), equitable civic participation to sustain societies is essential.

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