No Citizen Left Behind.

Reviewed by Joseph J. Frey

At the recent Pathways to Achieving Civic Engagement Conference, sponsored by North Carolina Campus Compact, Barbara Holland delivered closing remarks that included a call for higher education to pay closer attention to primary and secondary education, as well as its students (personal communication, February 5, 2014). Paraphrased, she reminded us that many of their students would soon be enrolled at our institutions. What better reason to forge stronger understanding and connections? At the time of the conference, I was knee-deep in the reading of No Citizen Left Behind by Meira Levinson and Holland’s sage words resonated loud and clear. With a title that plays off of the No Child Left Behind mandate, Levinson’s text argues for robust civics education across primary and secondary educational levels, with particular focus aimed at reducing what she terms the civic empowerment gap.

As a community engagement practitioner, my attraction to reading this text relates to my professional interest in preparing college students for lives of active citizenship. And while Levinson is squarely focused on K-12 education, her writing has relevance to the post-secondary world in multiple ways, especially in light of Holland’s call. The book not only helps higher education understand the state of civics education and how we may potentially partner with our primary and secondary education colleagues, it provides a framework for how we may also strengthen and deepen our own efforts at the post-secondary level to better educate for an engaged, effective citizenry. Anecdotes from the author’s middle school teaching experiences in the public schools of Boston and Atlanta make for an enjoyable read, but also lend credibility to her recommendations on civic education and the challenges of implementing such reforms. Combined with evidence from the research literature, her own research, and her viewpoint as a political philosopher, Levinson’s perspective is critical, unique, and thoughtful.
Laying the groundwork for her arguments, Levinson reviews research that indicates the existence of a civic empowerment gap. In speaking about her Boston middle school students, she states, “...there is ample evidence that they are unlikely to become active participants in American civic and political life. As a result, they are unlikely to influence civic and political deliberation or decision making” (2012, p. 31). This outcome is the result of a gap in civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes that exists between two groups – “ethnoracial minority, naturalized, and especially poor citizens, on the one hand, and White, native-born, and especially middle class and wealthy citizens, on the other” (2012, p. 32). And though Levinson states that all students need improved civics education, she concludes that civic education reform efforts in “de facto segregated schools” often located in urban areas, provide an important avenue for the reduction of the civic empowerment gap. The remainder of the text consists mainly of her vision for how schools can help mitigate this gap.

In chapter 2, Levinson tackles the necessity of confronting the issue of race within civic life and highlights three broad, related recommendations for civic education reform. First, she argues that all students should be taught to think using what W. E. B. Du Bois called double consciousness. Pedagogically, this entails preparing students to understand their personal perspective, which includes the impact of identity, and the specifics of power analysis. Second, Levinson believes that to achieve empowerment, students from marginalized populations should be taught the skill of codeswitching in order to garner the respect from those in the majority who wield power. Finally, she argues that to empower those from minority populations, educators must teach the strategies of effective collective action. Levinson concludes with a discussion of the challenges some, including elected officials, may have with her recommendations; she is aware that such race-conscious ideas may be viewed as “radical,” but she is firm in her perspective.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on reforms aimed at empowerment through history education as tied to civics. Levinson argues for the alteration of how U.S. history is taught and for an end to the use of national civic heroes as a means to civic motivation. History education should move from the teaching of one “unified American story” (which she states does not exist anyway), to “…an approach that encourages teachers and students both to co-construct truthful, empowering civic narratives and to engage with multiple civic narratives in their telling and analysis of history” (2012, p. 130). Such a change, she argues, will end the reinforcement of the “alienation and disempowerment” felt by students from marginalized communities that often occurs within the current traditional model of American history education. Connected to this idea is Levinson’s belief that the use of everyday, local role models should supplant “distant” civic giants (e.g. Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr.) as figures of civic empowerment in our schools. She believes that local individuals and the strategies they use to achieve positive civic outcomes provide more realistic, meaningful figures for emulation. In both chapters, Levinson emphasizes the value and necessity of local contexts within civics-related education; this strategy for effective student empowerment is a hallmark of her recommendations.
How schools may provide experiential opportunities for their students to enact citizenship is discussed in chapters 5 and 6. First, Levinson focuses on the potential for schools and teachers to influence the civic skills and behaviors of students. Such “civic communities” may do so through “…classroom procedures and routines, curricula and pedagogies, interactions in the hallways and cafeteria, and co-curricular and extracurricular activities” (2012, p. 174).

Chapter 6 continues with introductions to the concepts of guided experiential civic education and action civics – major aspects of Levinson’s approach to reducing the civic empowerment gap. Action civics, described as the “gold standard” of guided experiential civics education, serves to connect student and community, such that students not only learn about existing problems that have local relevance and import to the student, but teaches and requires them to engage in collective action at the local level to address said problems. Service-learning she states, does not delve into the policy and collective action arenas, and is thus typically politically safe. She pushes the reader to see the potential of what students can do and how such experiences increase students’ self-efficacy and empowerment. And while I think she has a narrow view of service-learning’s political potential, her point that the use of this pedagogy often does not go far enough in stretching students or in allowing students to work beyond the short-term amelioration of community problems, are points well taken. The importance of partnerships comes to light within this chapter, as the author highlights the challenges that educators might encounter with the use of action civics, including political controversy; such challenges are often the same as those which higher education faculty and staff highlight as challenges to successful community-university partnerships.

The final chapter presents additional challenges that guided experiential civic education may pose for educators, schools, and communities. Levinson highlights the scarcity or absence of resources and skills needed to implement this approach to civics education, as well as the political risks associated with engaging youth in community problems. The prominence of standards, assessment, and accountability in K-12 education is also discussed as a barrier to the implementation of Levinson’s recommended reforms. Again, she uses the argument that the local context plays such an important role in the teaching of civics, as she imagines it, that specific standards set at national or state levels will not serve this curriculum well. She sees a place for standards, assessment, and accountability, but a limited one.

Levinson’s text is insightful, thought provoking, rich in detail, and may make you long for a better civics education than you had. It certainly made me hopeful that such reforms in civics education could make for a stronger U.S. democracy. Educators, whether in the primary, secondary, or post-secondary world (thank you, Barbara Holland, for the reminder of our need to stay connected), and whether in the curricular or co-curricular realm, will take much from No Citizen Left Behind.

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