

American Public Education and the Responsibility of its Citizens (Sarah M. Stitzlein)

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Review of

American Public Education and the Responsibility of its Citizens

by Sarah M. Stitzlein. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2017

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In this compelling book, Sarah Stitzlein provides a clear reframing of the issues facing public schools in the United States today and offers a set of tools for addressing them. She makes the case for the responsibility citizens have—both to support public schools as democratic institutions and to monitor the way they go about accomplishing their goals. Stitzlein addresses the layers that this responsibility entails, from classroom practices to school governance and all the way to legitimacy through democratic participation. She does so by engaging deeply with a diverse set of scholarly debates in education, philosophy and politics, as well as a significant breadth of empirical studies on contemporary political trends and on practices in American schools. As a work that combines theory and practice, it develops frameworks advanced historically by Dewey (and Mann), and in current debates by Kathleen Knight-Abowitz, Eamonn Callan and Walter Feinberg among others. The richness of the text stems from Stitzlein's facility in moving across disciplines and debates as she makes the case for citizens' accountability for the future of their society as expressed in their relationship with public schools.

What I find most convincing and helpful in this book is what is at its heart; namely, a careful analysis of responsibility and accountability as they should be construed and implemented in schools, and an analysis of the role of citizens in maintaining the legitimacy of American democracy through their engagement with schools. Stitzlein offers direction, both institutional and individual, for how this renewed vision of democratic engagement can materialize. She presents concerns about the demise of collective aims and responsibilities surrounding the contemporary American education system to make a Deweyan case for transforming contemporary American democracy—despite its lack of collective action, its inequities, and its hyper-individualism—into a mode of associated living. At its core, this book is calling for realizing this vision through inviting and encouraging citizens to engage with their public schools and demand that they prepare the citizens that democracy needs, and through supporting schools as they take on the work of preserving democracy. Stitzlein shows the promise of public schools today, even in the face of competing demands of accountability-as-test-performance, but also how many of them resign to funding constraints and narrow perceptions of quality and achievement by educating children—especially poorer children—only for limited forms of functioning, and without enough attention to their civic present and future. She calls for greater engagement in this work:

[W]e should actively work to reshape and redefine identities and values, to reaffirm some key elements of democracy and revise others to reflect shifts in the culture that are aligned with justice and democracy ... reestablishing legitimacy to ensure that public schools reflect our values and those of liberal democracy. (p. 150)

The author recognizes that some would take the competing view, rejecting the vision of participatory democracy that animates this book and claiming that democracy is but the aggregate of personal preferences—at least in a domain as personal and value-laden as the education of one's children—and that therefore the way to express democratic commitment is by avoiding the bureaucratic imposition of one set of schools, representing one set of values, on all parents and students. This book aims to present the decision a parent makes about the education of her children as an aspect of a “shared political project” (p. 149), and that is the foundation on which the argument is built, as well as the toughest task the author takes on. What if citizens take on a shared political project which she sees as misguided (for instance, increasing the number of charter schools in their neighborhood)? To replace the notion of aggregate preferences with a notion of “better” democratic aims, this book constructs a set of strong arguments that are ultimately meant to override some citizens' expressed preferences for the sake of a more cohesive and demanding vision of democracy and of public schools. I was convinced, but I am an easy target for this argument, which the “education reformers” the author directly addresses and aims to convert may not be.

Throughout the book, public schools—seen as key democratic public institutions—are discussed both as an ideal, envisioned as “places where a wide array of individuals come together and engage in practices of democracy” (p. 45), as well as in their realistic and less desirable form. The critique of the realities of schooling is mostly focused on “the atrocities of inequity and disempowerment that they have facilitated” (p. 44). The book is focused more on the ways in which policy and public debates portray schools, and especially the aims that are attached to them, and less on pragmatic considerations related to their functions (though those still make some significant appearances). The public itself too is sometimes described in ideal terms, as engaged—or at least potentially engaged—in a reasonable shared discussion about the goals of education and how to best accomplish them through public schools. The power struggles around money, influence, or cultural values and the proper ways to express and preserve them, which are common in the contemporary public debates and policy fights surrounding schools at all levels, from school boards to the federal government, are not extensively taken up here; neither is the general apathy of many citizens concerning these matters, as evidenced by the low levels of voting in school board elections and limited public participation in their meetings. While Stitzlein is right that “elected school boards are required to function openly and transparently” (p. 76)—which is a more democratic approach than the alternative of appointing donors to an EMO¹ board—few citizens take the opportunity to attend board meetings, whereas many parents choose to enroll their children in the EMO's charter. This is not really a critique of the book, which is a theoretical analysis of the field rather than a white paper, but it does point to the difficulty in developing a normative framework and visions about schools in the current non-ideal conditions of justice and democracy, as well as the complexity of thinking and writing about them in a way that recognizes reality, but does not settle for it. For instance, Stitzlein sees the current difficulties (or “crisis”) of public schools not as a matter of poor performance but rather as a matter of citizen responsibility and political legitimacy. Are the two

¹ EMOs, or Educational Management Organizations, run charter schools in the United States.

mutually exclusive? Is there a coherent way of framing the issue of public education that would address both? And significantly, is there a way to reconcile Stitzlein's vision of participatory democracy, with its deep roots in the American tradition and its philosophy, with a zeitgeist of "stealth democracy" and with the (learned, but still authentic) demand by many parents to allow their children access to higher-performing schools, assessed by the more limited metrics? Stitzlein acknowledges many of these concerns and often discusses them directly, offering an admirable account of the way this debate might evolve beyond some of the current stalemates; ultimately, though, the difficulties are inherent to the problem and may be unresolvable by this type of undertaking.

Reasonable scholars and citizens question whether we can or should be made to agree on which shared goals our schools should espouse and pursue, and whether such goals can effectively be advanced by citizens. A more individualistic, libertarian or neoliberal vision of the type Stitzlein argues against would suggest that in the field of education, more than in the field of economics, the pursuit of the public good can only be accomplished through allowing each person (or family) to pursue their individual goals. This might be the case in objectionable pursuits such as the efforts to prevent integration (or promote re-segregation) of schools following the Brown decision, but it is also the case with the opt-out movement and other public efforts to assert parents' preferences over a top-down vision of shared goals. It is unclear whether this book supports citizens' movements such as the opt-out anti-testing efforts, which on the one hand are often locally organized endeavors that aim to promote a shared vision of schooling, but on the other hand are based on a view of education that does not always endorse the same type of shared goals advanced in this book. Harder still would be local efforts to expand the availability of charter schools, especially ones that do not live up to Stitzlein's vision of "functionally public schools—those operating in ways that engage with and support democracy and public life" (p. 65). The most disconcerting aspect of her analysis, though, is the detailing of how "homo economicus" is manufactured in the new schooling marketplace, and therefore the prediction that associated living—or democracy itself, if it is to be understood as not only procedural but also as a set of values and way of life—is under attack by those who would dismantle public schools. In a way, I find history to be a bit more of a consolation in this regard. Many Americans have always had the option to choose their school, through residential choice, private schooling and other market structures. This indeed generated many of the negative results Stitzlein warns about, including continued segregation and growing inequities. Democracy, however, has survived.

The core chapter of the book, Chapter 5, addresses concerns regarding the future of democracy by conceptualizing responsibility and accountability as dimensions of shared citizenship rather than as individual actions. Stitzlein forcefully argues for the collective responsibility of citizens to support and monitor public schools as guardrails of democracy, by contrast to the individual responsibilities that neoliberal thinkers identify as the key virtue of democratic citizens. Schools, in her framework, can be both the institutions that teach future citizens to develop and practice such collective aims, and the institutional contexts in which this responsibility is expressed and negotiated by adults, "simultaneously preserving and enacting democracy and public living for and within our schools" (p. 135). As passionate and convincing as her argument is, it remains hard to fathom how the distance can be bridged between her vision of what schools could and should be and what they currently are, as expressed, for instance, in her quote from Ohio Representative Andrew Brenner who stated that "public schools in America is socialism" (p. 133), or in the current disdain for "government schools."

Stitzlein does not shy away from this difficulty, and it remains to be seen how widespread her vision can become.

This book can be read not only as a contribution to educational philosophy and to democratic political theory, but also as part of the discussions in the new and growing field of civic studies. The scholarly contributions produced in this budding field provide part of the foundations for this book, and scholars who work on related issues would do well to engage with Stitzlein's arguments as a way of generating more direct engagement with thoughtful work on schooling. Scholars of civic studies and civic education, philosophers and political theorists, along with education reformers and defenders of public education would find the arguments in this book engaging and deep, covering legal cases and theoretical frameworks as well as the reality of schooling in America today.

About the Authors

Sigal Ben-Porath is a professor of education, philosophy and political science at the University of Pennsylvania. Her most recent book is *Free Speech on Campus* (Penn Press, 2017), and she is currently at work with Michael Johanek on another on school choice in the United States. Email: sigalbp@upenn.edu