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A welcome reminder that schools can help save democracy comes these days from Michael J. Feuer, Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at George Washington University in his book entitled *Can Schools Save Democracy?* Published by Johns Hopkins University Press, the project has the subtitle of *Civic Education and the Common Good*, which clarifies its purpose as an argument for the undeniable power of civic education. In other words, revitalizing civic education would definitely reassess the relevance of the politics, psychology, and economics of education in its relationship to the "common good":

> In a democracy, the education of the young is the one true hope for its preservation. Thomas Jefferson knew that, John Dewey knew that, and Michael Feuer reminds us once again. Hopefully, we listen to this important message. (Gloria Ladson-Billings, University of Wisconsin, Review on book cover)

The book is organized in four chapters, with an *Introduction*, a *Post-script*, and ending with *Acknowledgements*, *Notes*, *References*, and *Index*. The main focus in this well-researched and documented volume is clearly delineated in the *Introduction*, where the reader is provided an insight into the pursuit of justice in contemporary education, strongly affected by Covid-19 and its aftermath. Amid scary news and pessimism, Michael Feuer sounds an optimistic call for a complete re-appraisal of the cultural and political diversity based on the "common recipe of engagement and generosity." (p. 7)

Beginning with a question about the concept of civics, and resorting to research done by Hamilton and Parsi (2022), the author posits that the definition of civics "includes, and blends, knowledge, skills, disposition, and engagement." Along the same lines, we find the assertion that a type of democracy is still functioning and that gives us hope that "we are ready to experiment with ideas for making it even more moral and even more functional." (p. 13) In the same context, *civic* education is used "to denote strategies for engaging the worlds of business, government, media, philanthropy, and the schools," in relation to a heathy democracy. Similarly, *civics* education is used to refer to the teaching and learning of the same principles in "formal classroom settings." (ibid.)

In order to have a fruitful and purposeful outcome, as the author avers, civic education should be deemed to be theoretical, didactic, and active. When viewing the current approaches in the scholarly and popular literature, we are asked to reflect and find a practical way in implementing a revived curriculum to deal with "the erosion of civility and the demise of democracy." (p. 14) Specifically, the subtitle of the book will channel our attention to the "common good," with the understanding of the tensions between personal rights and social wrongs, and how democracies "manage and enforce economic, legal, and political arrangements." (p. 15) Practically, a model is suggested to link the K-12 and postsecondary sectors, so colleges and universities

can have higher expectations for student qualifications and predictions of their success. Another proposal would look at how future educators can indirectly affect institutions of higher education by "stimulating interactions among students majoring in education and their peers preparing for careers in science, business, government, and the arts." (p. 19)

Stronger ties are recommended to attenuate conflicts between educators and policy makers, which would lead to a consensus among "stakeholders" in the education system. Such collaboration would, in the author's opinion, empower and encourage professional development necessary to fight the spread of authoritarianism outside the United States. The general idea of the introduction is that we must create an atmosphere conducive to specific pedagogies that could be implemented and practiced successfully across the board.

Chapter 1 entitled *Free to Bruise, Political Economy and the Limits of Liberty*, starts from the premise that advances in Social Security, Medicare, environmental protection, occupational safety, federal funding of basic science, student loans, and the Affordable Care Act are positive signs that defy those who warn people against socialism and social engineering. Furthermore, as outlined here, the gap is obvious when we look at how Democrats honor the role of government versus the Republican solutions favoring the private sector. This leads eventually to Americans favoring public policy, but, as the present research study proposes, this must be strongly advocated in the public arena. Analyzing the philosophical approach of the new republic, the reader is presented with a clear explanation of its core meaning: "the revolutionary idea that government exists to serve the people and not the other way around, a chronic allergy to centralized authority, and our codified (if still unfulfilled) guarantee of individual rights." (p. 28)

Proud to elucidate, if there was any doubt, that America can boast a certain exceptionalism, Feuer is ready to celebrate the achievements accomplished in American colleges and universities, where the academic independence from the federal government has supplied generation after generation of research productivity and valuable contributions to the public welfare. Specifically, more than 2,000 think-tanks and research organizations contribute empirical analysis, evaluation of public programs, and policy recommendations, to which we may also add roughly 15,000 independent school districts operating under authority of 50-plus states, making public school the evident choice of majority of Americans. (p. 31)

Aware of the current situation, the author acknowledges the "*exceptionalist* philanthropic system," which empowers and rewards equally those families and foundations who invest in programs for the public good. The idea behind this statement is that "on balance more good than harm has come from a system that keeps some public money in private hands." (p. 32)

After a quick review of the "peculiar system of health insurance," the author admits that we spend more than other countries but enjoy less health, and that has to be recognized: "there is some truth in that statement." (ibid.) Supported by data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a careful interpretation leads to the real culprits: "massive inequality and an unconscionable child poverty level." However, the counterargument mentions the *Affordable Care Act,* which brings relief and coverage to millions of previously uninsured citizens. Nevertheless, such concerted efforts are not considered enough, and other investments must be factored in, like help with "child care, education, workforce development, and programs to reduce substance abuse, obesity brought on by bad habits, smoking, violence, and other toxic behaviors." (p. 33)

Based on the available data, the author ventures to declare that "*regulated* capitalism has brought more benefit to more people than any other system." (p. 34) To this powerful statement Feuer adds his own principles that should be included in the syllabi of civic education:

(1) That seemingly rational self-interest seeking does not necessarily yield socially rational outcomes;
(2) That to protect capitalism and its followers from its own self-destruction, political intervention – a visible hand, sometimes coercive, sometimes as a more gentle "nudge" toward better outcomes – is required. (p. 34)

Political commentators and economists are briefly analyzed, followed by a pithy commentary about Adam Smith and his insights about "the wealth of the nations" and his book entitled The Theory of Moral Sentiments, which according to the author, is worth mentioning because of the need for rules. A necessary clarification is provided by a note on the website of the Adam Smith Institute: "We have a natural tendency to look after ourselves … [but we] have to work on how to live alongside others without doing them harm … we force [people] … to obey the rules of justice because society could not otherwise survive." (Quoted on p. 37)

The trades-offs between efficiency and equity are followed by a similar critique of self-interest and competition, all of which are then viewed from a positive perspective, which states that "People have all the information they need to maximize their self-interest and that when freed to act accordingly the result will be ideal (or optimal) for society as a whole." (p. 39)

After a quick, but necessary, trip to the market, followed by relevant remarks about the power of assumptions, the focus of this chapter segues to what the author calls "From models to method: political economy in curriculum." Tragedy is mentioned in this context, first used in history and literature, and then articulated by Garret Hardin (1968), when he argues that "tragedy refers to situations in which instincts of self-preservation and rational use of limited resources lead to bad outcomes." (p. 51)

Several practical examples are provided to support the idea that sometimes unfortunate things may happen as a result of actions taken by good people. Two caveats are viewed, as the author suggests: First, "it is essential to reaffirm the obligation of the individual to resist temptations to blindly going along with the crowd." (p. 52) That also implies the responsibility of society to create an environment where moral behavior is an important ingredient. Second, "introducing the dilemma of unregulated individualism certainly does not mean proselytizing against freedom or denying the possibility that rational individuals can and often do make socially productive choices." (p. 53)

According to the author, societies usually find ways to avoid the worst consequences of individual choices, without "succumbing to the temptations of totalitarianism." (p. 58) As defended in the introduction, a "commons" logic is the main

focus in the first chapter. Supported by sound research and data, Feuer argues that the tragedy of the commons is not a destiny, but, instead, it can open our minds (and hearts) to the development of policies to prevent unexpected consequences.

As the title of Chapter 2. Civics as Process and Product suggests, a revived interest in civic education should involve the majority of our population in selecting and becoming "leaders capable of judicious and balance decision making." In the context of protecting democracy, the ensuing questions would automatically refer to "where and how will the relevant skills and knowledge be taught?" and relating to social goods, "What skills and behaviors are included, explicitly or implicitly, under the rubric?" (p. 63) To answer such questions, the author theorizes that we are dealing with a rarely stable equilibrium between schooling goals and the skills-development purposes of the economic or "human capital."

Historically speaking, a strong defense of having a curriculum decided by families and communities is stated and supported by Walzer (2004), a political philosopher who noted that:

> Civil society … would include a great variety of ethnic and religious and perhaps even racial groups, but the members of these groups would acquire the 'inestimable' good of citizenship only after a long period of practical education … in democratic virtue. Meanwhile, their children would get a formal education. (Quoted on p. 66)

Fast-forward to our times and we read that the American pragmatism encapsulates ideology and practicality, which manifest in decisions made by state boards of education and governors (in states like California, Texas and Florida, for example) whereby political ideologies on curriculum planning and instruction is designed after a careful analysis of the culture of local control, with its long history.

The author's minute dissection of the term *pragmatism* is also a robust argumentation statement. What it is implied here is the fact that a society's willingness to accept compromise, ambiguity, and reasonableness would be much better than perfect solutions and utopian fantasies. (p. 68) The solution for civics education proposed in this approach would be to 'orient' the youth toward civic awareness and understanding of democracy without giving too many details. In this vein, didactic methods and book learning may be necessary, but not sufficient without *experiential* learning, which would intersect with its product, "knowledge and skills that are taught formally because they are not likely to be learned otherwise." (p. 73)

Civic knowledge and civic behavior, as viewed in this book, are intricately connected, but we also need to ask if there is progress in learning such basic tenets of democracy. Research data provided by the author might make this issue an urgent matter: "Roughly 30 percent of white students but only 10 percent of Black and 12 percent of Hispanic students performed 'at or above proficient' on the 2022 Assessment." (p. 75) Similar sources point to "persistent disparities of resources … that correlate with the uneven distribution of students in proficiency brackets." (ibid.)

Circling back to the definition of civic knowledge, Feuer relies not only on political scientists who "are most interested in measures of knowledge of government," but also on "other educators and social scientists may be more interested in students' grasp of economic principles, capacity to lead a moral life, or ability to work in multicultural settings as the most valued outcome of education." (p. 76) However, in several cases skillfully presented here, we are led to believe there is a "citizenship education dilemma," which can be easily understood that when we blend experiential and formal learning, especially in something as complicated as civics, attention to context must be required.

Asking questions appears to be the strongest asset of this book, and the same chapter prevails in inquiries into relevant issues posed by educators:

> Throughout my career, there was no limit of things/ideas/topics that students threw out for discussion in my classroom, and much of it drew from the rhetoric/dialogue of their parents/households/churches/communities… How could I, as their teacher, enable these students to open their minds and make space for considering or even acknowledging opposing viewpoints from their immediate and most trusted inner circles? I don't know that in over twelve years in the classroom I ever landed on a solid answer to this question. (Quoted on p. 81)

Provoking and inspiring critical thinking might be one possible answer, although reactive responses should also be complemented by pro-active preparations on behalf of those who instruct our young people. Following the advice provided by Hochschild and Scovronick (2003), the author asserts that, in order to educate functionally democratic citizens, there are certain knowledge and skills that are needed, although the entire process "certainly entailed a blend of didactic and experiential learning." (p. 83)

The phrase "democratic education," as clarified here, has been touted to define the preparation of young people for democracy in schools that should be *democratic places*. Furthermore, the students' own community, in other words a school, can undoubtedly empower student participation in the political life simply by creating the proper democratic environment.

As discussed in the book, poor performance in high school STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) has also been compounded by "anxiety about encroachment of values and beliefs in public schools." As a result, since science studies revealed disaffection with the bureaucracy of public schooling, efforts have been made to import market-like models and "devolve decisions to local control." In general, and this is what the main point of this chapter is obviously trying to make, the author supports some kind of balance between more teaching of science and math versus an emphasis on humanities. And this begs a question that will be answered in the next chapter.

In a smooth transition, *Chapter 3. Curriculum Options. Schools of Thought*, points to a re-appraisal of civic instruction in schools, where democracy, a very sensitive issue for parents and school administrations has recently resulted in physically violent interactions. The crux of the matter is a realistic and viable school-based civic curriculum, and Cremin (1990) is brought into the debate:

> Transformation of curricula … [involves] a continuing political process in which various lay publics, the several professions with a stake in schooling, and a variety of special-interest groups [participate] in a continuing redefinition of what a high school education [means]. (Quoted on p. 92)

Following this well-put admonition, Feuer continues asking question after question, which inspire him to find the right answers again. A key question would probe if there is enough room in the already crowded high school material to be taught, which would also encourage teachers and their professional associations to prepare for such a challenging task. Aware of the current situation, the author avoids being prescriptive, but artfully describes the teaching of civics at the high school level: "Even though the content is not usually mandated separately, state standards typically include graduation requirements for some minimal number of credits in state and local government, with the expectation that such knowledge will promote greater civic understanding, responsibility, and participation." (p. 94)

According to the view presented in the same chapter, teacher preparation and the balancing of pedagogical and content knowledge are an integral part of teaching proficiency. The inter-weaving of values, tastes, and preferences, which are encapsulated in educator preparation, "happens in graduate training programs," but, equally relevant, "in liberal arts colleges that include opportunities for undergraduates to prepare for teaching careers, there is often a reliance on faculty in the various disciplines to provide content-specific input." (pp. 98-99).

When addressing the question of where and how to integrate civics in new curricular concepts, the author realizes that "it is important to acknowledge the diversity reflected in the highly individualized syllabi written and used by teacher educators in colleges and universities." (ibid.) Several syllabi examples are then suggested, and one stands out because of its scope meant to provide a solid foundation for teaching social studies courses including World Geography, Economics, Philosophy, World History, American Government, Psychology, and Sociology. H best part of such an approach is the fact that the syllabus includes an assignment to develop a mini-lesson on a 'structured academic controversy' referring to economic concepts.

Another example, on equally significant grounds, enlightens the ability of a school educator to understand and work efficiently with data, which in itself has become an essential life skill. Professor Victor Lee's course offered in 2022, entitled *Teaching Data Science in Secondary School,* comprises content knowledge on tools, platforms, and data environments, "as well as at least a basic understanding of artificial intelligence and machine learning." (p. 108) Suggested readings from theoretical literature and innovative experiential assignments would also lead to valuable discussions of "theories of individual rights, social goods, and the political economy of collective action." (ibid.)

Creative policy arrangements and arguments can be devised to explain their intricacies, but only well-prepared teachers can deliver the best messages to our students when arguments arise and educators are the ones who are qualified to find solutions related to the problems of civic responsibility and democracy. In the conclusion of *Chapter 3,* paraphrasing Shulman (1986), the author reinforces the idea that "Good educator preparation requires a blend of pedagogical knowledge (the wheelhouse of teacher educators) and content knowledge (drawing from economics, political theory, sociology, psychology, law, and the other relevant disciplines." (intro, p. 23)

The rationale for collaboration between schools and their constituencies is emphasized in *Chapter 4. Beyond the School House. Education as Public Good.* The balance of scientific research and education policy, perfected by their conceptual and organizational attributes, leads the author to declare that "the peculiar genius of the American education, with its complex and flexible allowances for public and private involvement, served as a proof-point for principles that would later become central to American science." (p. 132) To clarify such a statement, and borrowing from history, the author anticipates that civic education will hopefully benefit from funds from public and private sources, therefore reinforcing partnerships between schools and stakeholders.

Suggestions for overcoming financial and organizational obstacles that might hinder international partnerships and sustainable collaborations would include, among other ideas, the possibility for a sustained engagement leading to a set of products such as joint working papers, a digital platform for data sharing, and gatherings with policy makers and other influencers." (p. 145)

The book ends with an optimistic hope that, although political violence may be threatening our democracy, our nation will follow Benjamin Franklin's advice to "keep our republic", because there is so much relevance in imbuing several concepts and principles about the common good that should fit right into our civic education. This can easily be done by suggesting a wide array of theory and experiential evidence regarding fundamentals of choice, market, and goods in all university-based teacher education programs.

In a nutshell, *Can Schools Save Democracy?* is a well-researched and extremely minutely documented book that takes us on a journey of informative reading based on facts and personal opinions. The persuasive emphasis on the current status quo of the American public system of education deemed by some as "off track" gets ample attention and the author underlines the need for "policy that acknowledges and honors the role of government." As noted throughout the entire project, the public and private schools should find a midway "in pursuit of balanced and pragmatic problem-solving."

Analyzing the most pressing problems in today's American education, in the context of the current racial discrepancy and violent protests, erosion of trust in government and science in general, Feuer's highly opinionated and politicized verbiage blames – directly or indirectly - among other things, everything and everybody from former presidents to climate change, but mentions very little about the school indoctrination and the historical mistakes made by the present administration in Washington, DC. The author's practical suggestions can, however, inspire the avid reader to better understand the values of an enlightened democratic leadership as a hopeful path toward a better future. The artfully presented argument becomes obvious:

that civic education can be and should be revitalized by a sound approach to the way students acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to preserve this fragile concept of the "common good."

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