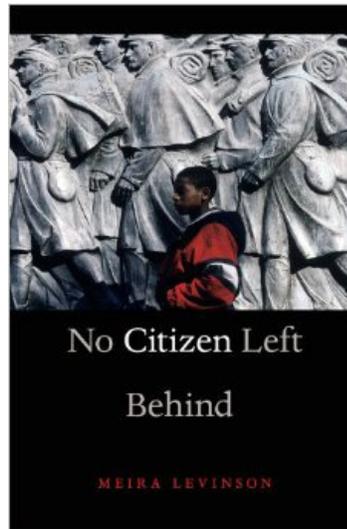


TWO BOOK REVIEWS: Dealing with issues of equity and diversity By Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG Coach in Wisconsin, davelehman@mac.com

No Citizen Left Behind

By Meira Levinson, 2012, Harvard University Press

No Citizen Left Behind is written by Meira Levinson, a Professor of Education at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. Professor Levinson begins all seven chapters and the prologue drawing on her recent experiences of eight years as an urban middle school teacher. Initially she worked at Walden Middle School in Atlanta (99% black, 94% free and reduced lunch), where she was hired to oversee the implementation of the “International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme.” She then moved to McCormack Middle School in Boston as an eighth grade social studies teacher.



The prologue begins with a story from her experience coaching the Walden National Academic League quiz bowl team. Returning home on the bus after being soundly beaten by the wealthiest and whitest suburban Boston team, Levinson discussed the event with her students. Clearly, questions requiring knowledge of Richard Nixon, Burt Bacharach, Bjorn Borg, John Wayne, and Kurt Cobain weren’t geared toward her black students. Levinson uses this conversation to describe what the book is all about and why she wrote it:

“I am convinced schools need to teach young people knowledge and skills to upend and reshape power relationships directly, through public, political, and civic action, not just private self-improvement.

“What does this look like in practice, especially in urban public schools like Walden that are struggling to provide even the academic basics to young people growing up in historically marginalized communities? What principles can and should guide this work? How can one justify to a skeptical public this ideal of empowerment—an ideal that literally puts power in the hands of youth?”

“These are the questions that I address [in the book]. In so doing, I also ask and strive to answer a number of other questions: Why should we care about empowerment, particularly within de facto segregated schools and communities? Does and should empowerment look different in these contexts than in others? When students are living in historically marginalized and disempowered communities, should schools focus on helping them gain the knowledge and skills to contribute to and build up their own communities, or to escape into more efficacious communities? How much can be achieved in settings such as Walden if we don’t transform education . . . in wealthier and whiter suburbs...? In this respect, what are the implications of the choices we make in de facto segregated schools and communities for the nation as a whole?”

Levinson uses another of her middle school teaching experiences to begin chapter three, “You Have the Right to Struggle: Constructing Historical Counter-narrative.” In this illustration,

she draws on her work with a group of her eighth graders who represent the student body's strong objection to the new mandate that they wear school uniforms. She agreed to assist these students who wanted to make this their "social science fair project." They researched the various reasons why school districts have instituted the wearing of school uniforms, scoured School Board minutes for any discussion and reasoning about requiring uniforms (and found none), then prepared to present their findings and concerns to the Atlanta School Board. Midway through their research, one of the students, James, looked up and commented:

"You know why the school board imposed uniforms, don't you? They don't want us to be in the 'hood, but they stuck with the school where it's at, so they gave us uniforms to make us look different."

"He right," Krystal concur[red]. "They want us to look clean, get the ghetto out of us. We look dumb walking down the street in them yellow shirts and blue pants."

In the results section of their report the students then stated their belief that the board had done everything in their power to separate Walden and its students from the surrounding neighborhood, families, friends, and culture. They believed the board had brought in the IB Programme and bused in 6th grade white, rich kids from outside their neighborhood, to make them look "clean," and "international," no longer a local, ghetto school. And the lack of any board discussion or opportunity for public discussion of the new policy was a blatant example of their disrespect for the students, families, and community. Levinson describes the take-away lessons from the experience—lessons for all of us—as follows:

"I assumed that as their teacher, I knew what they knew (and more, of course): in other words, that I knew the contours of their knowledge and their ignorance, and that anything they were knowledgeable about, so was I. Furthermore, I unthinkingly assumed that once my students had thought about what they knew and had learned, they would reach the same conclusions I did [uniforms could be a good thing]. Common data would lead to common conclusions. But I was wrong, both because I didn't know what they knew, and because we understood what we knew differently. I didn't know enough to understand their stories about how the uniforms visibly and symbolically separated them from their neighborhood.... Students learn civic and historical narratives from their families, neighbors, pastors, peers, and media. These sources vary widely in what they teach, especially as different ethno-racial, cultural, religious, and other communities hold and teach quite contrasting views about their place in history...."



Meira Levinson

Levinson is clearly concerned about students becoming not just knowledgeable of democracy and how it works, but learning how to, and actually becoming empowered to, fully engage in civic action. And this is of great concern as there is what she calls a clear "civic empowerment gap" in this country, beginning in our schools, and par-



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ticularly true for students of color, students of poverty, students with English as a second language, and students with disabilities. Thus, in chapter five, “How to Soar in a World You’ve Never Seen: Making Citizenship Visible in Schools,” she states:

“Schools need to exemplify the civic world that students have ‘never seen.’ They need to create model civic spaces for young people, and give students opportunities to develop and practice empowering civic skills, habits, attitudes. By doing so, schools promote and encourage students’ identities as efficacious, engaged youth. This is crucial especially for the many low-income youth of color who, outside of school, rarely have the opportunity to practice such skills and are often treated not as future productive citizens but as likely criminals.... Schools need to help change young people’s lived experiences. Youth at the bottom of the civic empowerment gap have no reason to embrace civic engagement in the absence of proof that it makes a difference, or that they are respected as citizens, as valued contributors to and rights-bearing members of society. School can and must help students experience empowered citizenship in order to enable young people to build the knowledge, skills, pro-civic attitudes, and habits of civic participation for the future. These experiences can and should be built into the everyday practices of school.”

Levinson describes her “democratic theory of change” and what she sees as four essential pedagogical characteristics of schools: “intentionality, transparency, reflection, and authenticity.” She believes that if schools actively embody these characteristics, then the civic relationships, norms, and habits they model will have a real chance of sticking. She then makes a strong case for an “open classroom climate” that actively encourages and supports “student voice,” where students can freely engage in lively, authentic discussions of controversial points of views while listening to others’ different perspectives. She cites supportive research for this pedagogical essential:

“Research over the past forty years across dozens of countries has conclusively demonstrated that students’ belief that they are ‘encouraged to speak openly in class’ is ‘a powerful predictor of their knowledge of and support for democratic values, and their participation in political discussion inside and outside school.’ Students’ experiences of an open classroom climate are positively associated with overall civic and political knowledge, intent to vote, likelihood of being an informed voter, expectation of engaging in other political and civic actions, expression of political efficacy and

civic duty, comfort with civic and political conflict, interest in politics and attentiveness to current events, and critical thinking and communications skills. These findings are consistent and strong across a wide variety of schools both within the United States and around the world.”

Levinson gives several examples of ways to do this in the classroom based on her own experience. She also suggests ways for teachers to scaffold their teaching to help students develop the requisite skills and attitudes.

In the closing chapter, “Democracy, Accountability, and Education,” Levinson offers the following summary:

“In this book, I have argued in favor of a particular ideal of civic empowerment and education: one that is egalitarian, collective, engaged, inclusive, eclectic, change-oriented rather than status quo-preserving, responsive to lived experience as opposed to embodying solely theoretical ideals, informed by knowledge, enabled by skills, made consistent by habit, and motivated by efficacious, responsible, and critical attitudes. In the course of this argument, I have told teachers what they should do in their classes, administrators how they should revise school practices, publishers how they should rewrite their textbooks, and parents and students themselves what they should demand from their schools.”

Thus, I urge all readers of **Connections** to take up the cause, to get involved in closing the “civic empowerment gap,” and to begin, perhaps, by reading this book! Our democracy will only become what it is capable of being if each successive generation becomes civically active, learning-by-doing what it means to live in a democracy. I’ll close this review with the same quote I used from Levinson in the July issue of **Connections**, Part-2, “Thinking About Teaching Thinking”:

“Ultimately, this is for our own benefit as much as theirs. If we want to live in a better world, in a stronger democracy, in a United States that truly stands one day for ‘justice for all,’ we need the insights, energy, and knowledge that young people – including low-income youth of color – bring to the struggle. We also need the wisdom they will bring when they are older. Tackling the civic empowerment gap today expands the ranks of active citizens both now and in the future. This long-term, communal, and equitable engagement is essential for achieving the ‘more perfect Union’ to which we all aspire. It is time for us to move forward together.”