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AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ITS CITIZENS: SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Johnnie R. Blunt

Sarah M. Stitzlein, *American Public Education and the Responsibility of Its Citizens: Supporting Democracy in the Age of Accountability*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 228 pp. ISBN 13: 978-0-19-065738-3. \$35.00 (hardback).

In his 1916 preface to *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey comments that the main goal of his book was “to detect and state the ideas implied in a democratic society and to apply these ideas to the problems and enterprise of education. The discussion includes an indication of the constructive aims and methods of public education as seen from this point of view.”¹ More than 100 years later, Sarah M. Stitzlein confirms Dewey’s ideas and expands his scholarship to defend the political legitimacy of public education in the United States. She argues that public schools should enable children to become good citizens who engage in the pursuit of individual happiness, while fighting for social justice. Stitzlein contends that effective public education builds certain desirable characteristics for citizens in a democracy, including “trust, exchange, respect for equal justice under law, appreciation for civil discourse, free and open inquiry, knowledge of rights, and recognition of the tension between freedom and order.”² Stitzlein argues that public schooling enables children to respect and communicate with different publics or populations and to recognize that an effective democracy requires a delicate balance between the fulfillment of private and societal needs. Because public education serves this democratic purpose (public good), the author claims that members of increasingly diverse publics are responsible for collaborating with teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders to ensure that public education sustains an ever-evolving democracy. Stitzlein supports this argument in nine very cogent chapters.

In chapter 1, Stitzlein suggests that in an age of neoliberalism, privatization, and corporate interests in public education systems, citizens must remember that they are the publics that constitute *public* education. The author notes, “The public is, at base, the *demos* of democracy, the people who constitute it and who engage in ruling (*kratos*) it. The state or government provides the structure through which the public implements its will, and it is guided in its organization and practice by a

constitution.”³ Although she refers to “the public” in the previous statement, citing Kathleen Knight Abowitz, Stitzlein frequently uses “publics” to describe groups of people who have shared interests and problems. The author suggests that publics are not synonymous with community. As opposed to the geographical boundaries and often permanent natures of communities, publics are ubiquitous and ephemeral subsets of people from communities.

In chapter 2, Stitzlein draws a strong connection between democracy, publics, public schools, and accountability. The author suggests that accountability traditionally refers to an institution’s ability to meet the expectations of a public. In the past, public education accountability referred to a school system’s ability to meet the expectations of a local community and its publics who actively participate in the accountability process. The author argues that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and other federal and state government initiatives changed the definition of accountability to compliance to state and federal governmental standards. As such, accountability no longer takes the voices of local communities and their diverse publics into account. Public school teachers and administrators comply with government-mandated criteria. Citizens (publics) become consumers who shop for the best public education services for their children.

In chapter 3, Stitzlein defines public schools and describes school choice trends. The author claims that public schools ideally should meet five criteria. First, they are open to all citizens and publics. Second, they serve these publics. Third, they are responsive to these publics. Fourth, they are creators of publicness.⁴ Finally, public schools “sustain democracy by developing skills and dispositions within children for participating in it.”⁵ Public schools provide universal education to local communities. Public schools serve the educational and sociopolitical needs of and collaborate with local communities. Equally important, public schools sustain democracy (“publicness”) through the creation of skills and dispositions that enable children to work across cultural, racial, and ethnic difference to address shared concerns. Stitzlein uses functionally public schools to describe any school (public or private) that meets the above five criteria.

Stitzlein argues that school choice trends may endanger public schooling. School choice enables parents to shop for the best education for their children. For instance, school vouchers enable parents to use public funds to enroll in private schools. Often managed by corporations, charter schools enable teachers, parents, and other groups to charter or create a school based on specific group needs. Stitzlein argues that although school vouchers and charter schools may appear to be viable solutions to current achievement gaps in urban public schools, they may violate one or more criteria for public schooling. For example, charter schools may be responsive to private corporations, not local communities. Private schools are often religiously based and usually do not enroll all members of a community. Stitzlein notes that vouchers for religiously based schools may violate separation of church and state,

although the Supreme Court has ruled that giving public funds to private religious schools is within the scope of the U.S. Constitution. In short, the author argues that school choice trends upset the balance between private needs and social responsibilities. Children who attend private schools or charter schools may receive a competitive education at the expense of learning how to be effective members of a democracy.

Using the previous five criteria, Stitzlein extensively critiques school choice in public schooling in chapter 4. Stitzlein conducts a critical discourse analysis of publications, websites, court cases, news stories, and other documents to analyze how dominant political and economic ideologies inform the current reforms in public education. Stitzlein finds that most of the material transforms public education from a public good to a private marketplace.⁶ The author extends her argument to assert that school choice, especially charter schools, often disconnects communities from their own schools. Although charter schools were originally founded to help groups of parents provide specific public educational experiences for their children, Stitzlein discovered that charter schools are often operated by corporations that make decisions without the consent of their local communities.

Having outlined the problems with current public education trends, Stitzlein offers advice for increasing citizen participation and improving public schooling for all students in chapters 5 and 6. She argues that “[citizens] have a responsibility to support public schools as a central institution of democracy—one that not only sustains in the future but also, when working well, showcases democracy in action in the present.”⁷ Although public education policies seem to originate from special interest groups and politicians, Stitzlein contends that citizens have the responsibility to “determine the expectations of schools and the criteria [citizens] use to measure their effectiveness at meeting those goals.”⁸ The author contrasts and compares rights and responsibilities by quoting John Dewey’s definition of rights as “powers which are not mere claims, not simply claims recognized by others, but claims reinforced by the will of the whole community.”⁹ Stitzlein argues that rights evolve through the will of communities whose members (publics) continually deliberate across differences and act on shared concerns. In other words, rights are not automatic individual entitlements; they are the core of the relationships within and across diverse publics.

Stitzlein claims that rights are reciprocal to responsibilities and oppositional to current definitions of accountability. She contends that responsibility reflects an obligation downward and laterally. Teachers, for instance, may be held responsible to their students and to the students’ parents for ensuring a quality education. Stitzlein argues that responsibility is a proactive stance that enables positive action. The author claims that accountability, on the other hand, is often reactive and directed upward. Teachers may be held accountable to administrators and government officials. Accountability is often linked to failure to meet certain goals, such as benchmark test scores. Stitzlein suggests that accountability is associated with

a “blame game,” while responsibility indicates moral obligations to communities. A main point of the author’s argument is that the *public* in public education has been alienated from its moral obligations that ensure public schooling perpetuates democracy and democratic principles. In the next chapter, Stitzlein examines a factor linked to this alienation: political legitimacy.

In chapter 7, Stitzlein connects political legitimacy with the will of the people. The author notes, “The political legitimacy of a state or its institutions arises from citizens concluding that these are worthy of recognition and serve a justified role.”¹⁰ In an age of accountability, high-stakes testing, failing public schools, school choice, privatization, and neoliberalism, Stitzlein acknowledges that a growing number of citizens may deem public education illegitimate because it does not seem to echo the will of the people to freely choose the best educational options for their children. To counter this argument, the author contends that the legitimacy of public education relies on the institution’s ability to facilitate deliberative and participatory democracy, in addition to serving students’ private career and educational needs.

Stitzlein continues this argument in chapter 8, aptly titled “Citizenship Education and Habits of Democracy,” in which the author examines citizenship in the context of Dewey’s participatory democracy and reviews the everyday habits that sustains democracy. According to Stitzlein, citizenship education denotes considering how best to live one’s public and private life in the context of others in one’s local, and increasingly global, community. Throughout her text, Stitzlein argues that public schools are the most optimal sites for such education. Public schools can develop habits (dispositions and actions) of democracy. Stitzlein quotes John Dewey’s definition of habits: “All habits are demands to certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligent sense of the word will, they *are* will.”¹¹ At their best, public schools develop habits of deliberation and collaboration across diverse publics. As Stitzlein argues, “developing habits of democracy . . . would likely necessitate immersing individuals in practices of shared living where those habits serve their needs.”¹²

In chapter 9, Stitzlein lists several of these habits: (1) citizenship as shared fate, (2) communication, (3) collaboration and compromise, (4) deliberation, analysis, critique, and dissent, and (5) hope. In a democratic society, citizens should learn to communicate across differences to solve common problems. This communication involves respectfully deliberating, analyzing, and critiquing ideas and solutions. This respectful communication is important because diverse publics have a shared fate. In the case of public education and democracy, diverse publics stand together and ensure that a government for the people and by the people continues. Stitzlein argues that the habit of hope, a realistic optimism and continuous work, is the foundation of the other habits. Although public education (and thus a democratic society) is in crisis in the United States, Americans can work across differences to improve the situation.

Hope is an important element of Stitzlein's book. The author could simply examine the current educational crisis, list a series of problems, and suggest relatively easy fixes. Instead, Stitzlein engages in a complex but highly readable argument that benefits many shareholders, from teachers to policy makers. Stitzlein's theoretically informed arguments offer viable ways of seeing and responding to the current education crisis. This well-written book is a wonderful addition to the libraries of John Dewey scholars. Dewey's theories of education inform Stitzlein's arguments, and Stitzlein's lucid prose and interpretations often clarify Dewey's more challenging concepts. This reviewer highly recommends this book to anyone concerned with the current crisis in public education.

NOTES

1. John Dewey, "Preface," *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).
2. Sarah M. Stitzlein, *American Public Education and the Responsibility of Its Citizens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.
3. *Ibid.*, 29.
4. *Ibid.*, 49–50.
5. *Ibid.*, 50.
6. *Ibid.*, 64–65.
7. *Ibid.*, 93.
8. *Ibid.*, 93.
9. *Ibid.*, 96.
10. *Ibid.*, 140.
11. *Ibid.*, 169.
12. *Ibid.*, 177.

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