



Education Review

Reseñas Educativas

Resenhas Educativas

August 23, 2023

ISSN 1094-5296

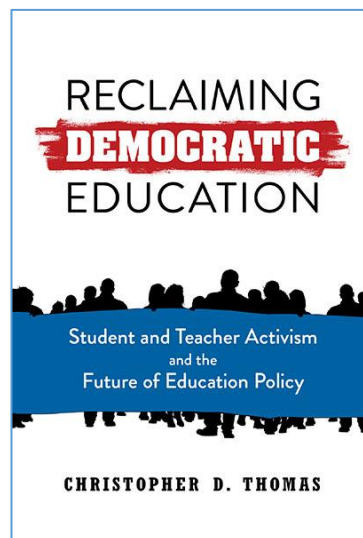
Thomas, C. D. (2022). *Reclaiming democratic education: Student and teacher activism and the future of education policy*. Teachers College Press.

Pp. 150

ISBN: 9780807766903

**Reviewed by Brandon J. Yuhas
Arizona State University
United States**

In the spring of 2018, student protests and teacher strikes took place in the United States in a way that had not been seen since the mid-1960s and early 1970s, often referred to as “the decade of protest.” Following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, during which a gunman killed 17 people and injured 17 others, students protested the nation’s gun violence and how it had affected them as students. Many were students at MSD and other sites of school shootings. Yet others belonged to the multitude of students who attended schools in the criminalized and policed spaces that schools had become since the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in the US state of Colorado. At the time of the Florida shootings, teachers in conservative states went on strike, demanding better compensation and better funding for education, often ahead of their unions.



But in Christopher D. Thomas’s book *Reclaiming Democratic Education: Student and Teacher Activism and the Future of Education Policy*, the author suggests that the K-12 student and teacher civic activism of 2018 was remarkable in at least one other way: It took place in an era of education policy in the US that has been characterized by neoliberal, neoconservative, and religious authoritarian populist ideologies for 35 years. That is, although these protests and strikes continued a long tradition of such activism, they occurred at a

Yuhas, B. J. (2023, August 23). Review of *Reclaiming democratic education: Student and teacher activism and the future of education policy* by C. D. Thomas. *Education Review*, 30. <https://doi.org/10.14507/er.v30.3739>

time when a post-Reagan conservative political movement continues to dominate education policy. Thomas explores these historical developments, with a focus on the strong connection between student and teacher civic engagement historically, during the 2018 protests and strikes and since. Thomas maintains that in addition to specific demands that the teachers and students made in 2018, they also sent a clear message to state and federal policymakers: They rejected the decades-long *A Nation at Risk* policy model and its underlying ideologies and the detrimental results it had had on public education in the US. In its place, Thomas proposes a new policy model and focus that centers preparation for citizenship as the primary goal of public education.

Thomas is a former high school English teacher who holds a PhD in education policy and a JD from The Ohio State University. He is currently a practicing attorney who primarily represents local school districts and other governmental bodies. He has written a book that will be appeal to education policy researchers interested in neoliberalism and neo-conservative ideologies and their influence on public education in the US, student and teacher civic activism, and the question of what role public education should primarily play in a democratic society. Readers interested in the issues of teacher retention and empowerment, as well as student engagement and discipline, will also find much of value in this book. In addition, educators interested in these topics who have had little, or perhaps no previous exposure to these topics, will find Thomas's writing consistently clear and engaging.

Thomas observes that preparing students for responsible civic duty as citizens of a democratic country and preparing them to contribute to the national economy have historically been widely understood to be important—and often competing—goals for US public education. The problem, he argues, is that for more than three decades the ideology of the *A Nation at Risk* report has emphasized the latter at the expense of the former. According to Thomas, the protests and strikes of 2018 represented students' and teachers' rejection of 35 years of harmful policies focused almost exclusively on preparing students in the US to participate in the neoliberal globalized economy. The protests and strikes also exemplified the healthy expression of democratic civic engagement by K-12 students and teachers.

At 150 pages, *Reclaiming Democratic Education* is a fairly slender book of seven chapters. The first five chapters lay the foundation for Thomas's thesis concerning a new paradigm in education policy that centers on the goals of "cultivating active citizenship and civic agency" that is guided by an underlying ideology of deliberative democracy. Thomas uses these chapters to contextualize the student protests and teacher strikes of the spring of 2018 and to trace the history and interconnectedness of student and teacher civic activism in the US. He also details the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report and its subsequent policy effects, which placed limits on student and teacher civic activism and agency. Readers with extensive knowledge of these topics may find this much background excessive. I, however, learned much about

student and teacher civic activism in the US and the *A Nation at Risk* ideology.

Having addressed the limitations placed on students and teachers and the resulting pushback, Thomas turns his attention to theorizing what he terms an Education for Citizenship paradigm. According to Thomas, this new paradigm “[centers] civic agency and [aligns] with deliberative democratic theories that advance a conception of citizenship founded on civic agency” (p. 96). He describes five policy recommendations that support the movement away from the current *A Nation at Risk* model and toward one emphasizing Education for Citizenship:

- (a) an interruption of “the crime control paradigm and its punitive approach to student behavior” which became prevalent following the Columbine High School shootings;
- (b) the “[empowerment of] students in their own learning by respecting them as rights holders and future citizens;”
- (c) the “[protection] and [promotion of] teacher collective agency;”
- (d) the “[engagement of] students, teachers, parents, and local, state, and national communities in the collaborative work of creating educational policy;” and
- (e) the “[centering of] democracy at the heart of teaching and learning” (p. 116).

Thomas maintains that these shifts would oppose the ways that teachers and students have been positioned as passive recipients of education policy (i.e., teachers as following the prescriptions of political elites and private interests, and students as consumers of education). Importantly, an Education for Citizenship focus would not ignore the need for students to be prepared to participate in the nation’s economy once they leave public schools. However, rather than graduating students who are college and career ready, students would be “citizen ready,” which would “[include] being a productive member of our national economy” (p. 97).

Readers interested in the effects of social class on education policy and student learning will be especially interested in Chapter 5, in which Thomas observes that Parkland, where MSD High School is located, is an affluent suburb of Fort Lauderdale. Thomas argues that the affluent circumstances of the majority of the school’s students and the school’s corresponding strong academics allowed MSD to loosen the hold that the *A Nation at Risk* model has on lower performing schools serving students of lower income backgrounds. Such schools are often characterized by outside accountability measures and a corresponding narrowing of the curriculum. MSD was better positioned to offer classes on TV production, journalism, debate, civics, and drama. In other words, MSD, as a result of its socioeconomic advantages and higher test scores, was able to provide students with the knowledge and skills that enabled them to develop their civic agency and then engage in civic action following the gun violence at their school. Thomas argues that

centering citizenship in public education would prepare all students to engage in civic action like this, and not only in response to tragedy. Unfortunately, he does not address how schools serving students of working class and lower middle-class backgrounds—students who arguably stand to benefit the most from developing civic agency and expressing it—might foster civic agency among their students.

This small criticism notwithstanding, I believe Thomas has written an important, compelling, and timely book. Currently, US states such as Arizona and Florida (two of the conservative states that Thomas focuses on) may be understood to be engaging in what Thomas refers to as a “[doubling] down on the A Nation at Risk paradigm” which “[seeks] to further solidify a policy environment that endorses a passive conception of student and teacher civic agency” (p. 120). For example, in response to policy indicative of this doubling down, which Thomas maintains “simultaneously—and paradoxically—[fosters] the conditions that lead students and teachers toward civic activism” (p. 120), teachers and students in Arizona have recently protested together at the Arizona State Capitol and the Arizona Department of Education (Tavitian, 2023). Current events such as this lend support to Thomas’s argument. Although the dominant education policy paradigm has defined democracy in neoliberal terms and limited K-12 civic agency, students and teachers continue to exercise agency in a way “that celebrates and closely aligns with traditions of the democratic aims of education in the United States” (p. 72).

References

Tavitian, A. (2023, March 15). *Members of the Arizona Education Association protest at the Arizona State Capitol*. Arizona Republic.
<https://www.azcentral.com/picture-gallery/news/local/arizona-education/2023/03/16/students-and-teachers-protest-arizona-state-capitol/11480506002/>

About the Reviewer

Brandon J. Yuh is a PhD student at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University where he studies educational policy and evaluation. His interests center on economic and sociological issues of education and opportunities for K-12 students from lower income backgrounds, including emergent bilinguals/English language learners.





Education Review

Reseñas Educativas

Resenhas Educativas



Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas is supported by the Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State

University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Education Review*, the changes are identified, and the same license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.



Disclaimer: The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.