education review // reseñas educativas
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a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

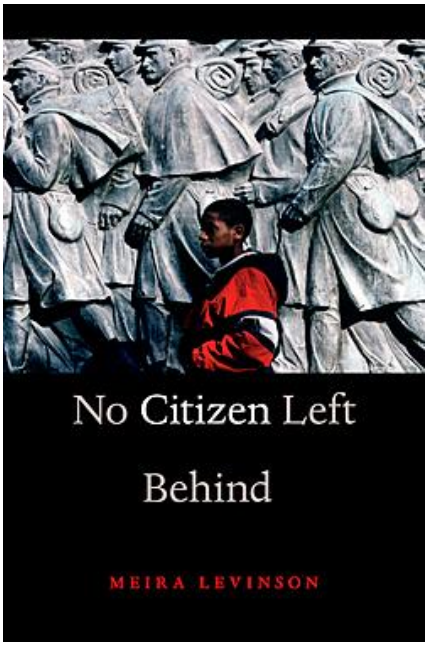
August 30, 2013 ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
the National Education Policy Center, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University
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Levinson, Meira. (2012). *No Citizen Left Behind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pp. 388 ISBN 978-0-674-06578-9

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Public schools in the United States serve a critical democratic purpose, the creation of an informed and active democratic citizenry. In her book *No Citizen Left Behind*, Harvard Graduate School of Education Associate Professor Meira Levinson presents evidence of significant disparities in civic knowledge and participation among different ethno-racial groups to argue that our schools fail at their democratic mission. In addressing this failure, she offers a set of theoretically grounded yet practical reforms in civic education practices so that all students will be prepared for civic and political action. Her reform agenda ranges from changing the

Citation: Keegan, Patrick & Anand R. Marri. (2013 August 30) Review of *No citizen left behind* by Meira Levinson. *Education Review, 16.* Retrieved [Date] from http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1247.pdf

historical narratives found in textbooks, to making all schools civically empowering spaces.

Levinson's understanding of the underlying causes of the civic empowerment gap, and what can be done to address it, is informed by three different epistemologies, or "ways of knowing." The first is her professional experience as a classroom teacher in de facto segregated public schools in Atlanta and Boston. Each chapter of the book opens with a personal vignette from Levinson's own classroom that illustrates the challenges she faced in closing the gap in her students' civic experiences. Second, Levinson draws upon her academic training as a normative political philosopher to provide a nuanced set of theoretical arguments for and against various proposals. Finally, beyond the anecdotal evidence she offers from her own teaching experience, as well as data she collected from interviews with parents, civic leaders, and students, Levinson draws from empirical research from across the social sciences in order to advance her claims.

By making these different ways of knowing transparent, Levinson invites her readers to "evaluate [her] arguments" and to take an honest look at any underlying "assumptions and biases that may have clouded [her] judgment" (pp. 18). In this spirit of dialogue, our review of *No Citizen Left Behind* is an attempt to enter into a conversation with this provocative set of ideas. In particular, we focus on addressing the civic empowerment gap among immigrant students. While Levinson does discuss the unique needs of immigrant students, we feel this group of youth should receive even greater attention for a number of reasons. First, foreign-born students and the children of immigrants make up a growing percentage of students in U.S. schools. These students constitute an even greater percentage of school populations in urban areas, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Boston. Second, immigrant students are more likely to attend de facto segregated schools that are the target of Levinson's reforms, and which lack adequate resources and experienced teachers (García and Kleifgen, 2010). Finally, given the increasing number of immigrant youth with transnational attachments, civic education practices that take the nation-state as the pivotal reference point for the development of a civic identity are now outdated. Closing the civic empowerment gap requires a better understanding of the effects of exclusionary

discourses that position immigrant youth as less than full citizens.

Levinson begins her discussion of the civic empowerment gap by citing the results of the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment, showing that White, Asian, native-born, and middle-class students outperform their Black, Hispanic, and foreign-born peers. These differences in civic knowledge, as measured by NAEP results, mirror patterns of adult civic engagement as well. According to U.S. census data White, well educated, wealthy, native-born U.S. citizens are more likely to vote and participate in other civic activities, such as contacting an elected official or working with a neighbor to solve a community problem.

Unfortunately, Levinson uses broad racial categories, based on U.S. Census and NAEP assessment data, to document the civic empowerment gap. She, for example, does not distinguish between Asian American groups, who according to these data are the least civically engaged. Ironically, she raises her own concerns about the use of ethnoracial classifications. For example, Levinson tells the story of her former immigrant students from Cape Verde who chafed at being racialized as Black when the Boston Public Schools gathered data about them. Despite these reservations, Levinson justifies her use of these ethnoracial classifications because "for better or worse, these are the terms that most Americans of all ethnoracial backgrounds use to refer to themselves and others" (pp. 68). She overlooks the fact however that many immigrant youth resist these ethno-racial categories (Kasinitz *et al*., 2001; Louie, 2006; Stepick *et al*., 2001).

Levinson further defends her belief in the significance of ethnoracial identities because they serve as an important means of mobilizing youth to become civically engaged (p. 65). She bases this claim in part on research that shows that racial group consciousness spurs participation among African Americans who see their fate as linked with other members of their race. However, as one study of Black politics in New York City showed, African American racial group identity may not extend to other non-White immigrants, such as Afro-Caribbean immigrants (Rogers, 2006). The Afro-Caribbeans interviewed for the study drew heavily on their ethnic identity and home country ties

rather than their race as a means of coping with racism in the United States.

According to Levinson, civic education can promote racial solidarity and increase civic engagement by teaching students historical counternarratives. She argues the traditional narrative of U.S. history children learn in school, that the U.S. has made slow but steady progress towards extending the rights of citizenship to an increasing number of Americans, needs to be replaced with a counternarrative of struggle, obligation, and opportunity. This new narrative would include stories of marginalized peoples, such as those who took part in the civil rights movement, that have forced the United States to live up to its ideals of liberty, equality, and justice through civic action.

However, for the same concerns raised earlier about the fluid and contested nature of immigrant youth identity, cultivating racial awareness and solidarity by teaching historical narratives may prove difficult. Just as Levinson's own students resisted the Black/White racial binaries imposed on them by the Boston Public Schools, immigrant students may choose not to identify as Black and therefore feel excluded from historical narratives that focus exclusively on the contributions of African Americans towards racial equality. Studies of immigrant assimilation reveal that immigrant youth respond to racialization in different ways. For instance, some choose to assimilate by assuming their place in the American racial hierarchy, while others identify more strongly with their ethnic identity (Kasinitz et al., 2009) or may feel a sense of belonging to more than one nation-state (Abu El-Haj, 2007).

Levinson partly addresses these concerns by proposing that teachers and students co-construct these narratives, informed by students' civic experiences and the socio-cultural context in which students learn. Therefore, the same narrative of U.S. history would not be taught to all students. Teachers might encourage immigrant students, for example, to view their own family's journey to the U.S. in search of educational and economic opportunity as part of a broader narrative of struggle, opportunity and obligation. The controversial claim that different ethnoracial groups should be taught different versions of

American history is subject to another set of criticisms. For instance, absent a common historical narrative that all children learn in school young people may be unable to adopt a common national identity. We side with Levinson however that "given the variation in people's lived experiences, in their knowledge and conceptions of history… no civic narrative will work for all students." The variety of experiences of immigrant students alone attests to this fact.

A final challenge Levinson faces is choosing a definition of good citizenship. Early in the book she adopts a consensus view of what makes a good citizen put forward in a report called *The Civic Mission of Schools* (Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, 2003). This definition includes characteristics such as being tolerant and respectful of others, thinking critically about matters of public concern, and acting politically in a variety of ways. However, this definition fails to capture other forms of civic engagement that would provide a more complete picture of the civic empowerment gap and shed new light on how to motivate future participation. According to this narrow view, the following civic activities would be excluded: an immigrant youth translating for an older family member (Stepick et al., 2008); a Black student working hard in school as a means of critically resisting the myth of African American intellectual inferiority (Carter, 2008); membership in the Black Church (Ladson-Billings, 2004); or performing hip-hop as a way to call attention to the problems facing urban youth (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). These alternative modes of civic action may serve to illuminate important ways many youth exercise agency.

According to Levinson, traditional measures of civic engagement, such as voting, joining a civic organization, or getting involved in a political campaign, deserve greater attention because involvement in these mainstream forms of political participation are what lead to greater political power. Related concerns about the inability of her Black students to participate in mainstream culture also led Levinson to question the Afrocentric curriculum at her school. While Levinson clearly does not consider Black culture to be a deficit that her students must overcome, she does feel that her students lack important cultural capital. For these same reasons, Levinson seems to discount non-

traditional forms of civic engagement as insufficient in bringing about real social change.

Many of Levinson's other educational proposals deal effectively with narrowing the civic empowerment gap for immigrant students. For instance, her conceptualization of action civics as a virtuous cycle of acquiring civic knowledge and skills, using them to bring about social change, and reflecting on achievements and learning would serve as an excellent way for immigrant youth to begin to shift the discourse on immigration in their own community. More broadly, civic education must also take into account the transnational experiences of immigrant students who derive a sense of belonging from more than one nation-state. These immigrant students may recognize and take advantage of the benefits of U.S. citizenship and yet still not feel American. This reflects the ways in which exclusionary discourses force many immigrant students to choose between assimilating by adopting American ways, and remaining loyal to their former cultural selves, which leads in turn to fractured, rather than hybrid, identities. Civic education should view immigrant students' transnational commitments as resources for civic engagement both within the United States and abroad.

In sum, *No Citizen Left Behind* presents far-reaching proposals and offers a sophisticated set of arguments for a civically empowering education. Anyone concerned with the continued health of democracy and civic engagement in the United States should give these ideas serious consideration.

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Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware The National Education Policy Center http://nepc.colorado.edu, and the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

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