

Children as Citizens: Educative Environments that Enable Participation and Contribution

Sarah M. Stitzlein

University of Cincinnati

I confess that I am “guilty as charged” by Tony DeCesare.¹ That said, I am taking this not as an indictment but rather as more of a Socratic gadfly moment. I am being stung into a new way of seeing children, and I am grateful for the opportunities that it presents. Too often, I have operated with a view of children as not yet fully citizens, without stopping to question if and why that is even the case. I appreciate that DeCesare’s article forces me to do that. He pushes me to consider how seeing children as citizens is a matter of justice, to acknowledge what children already contribute to democracy, and, most importantly, to go further in imagining what it would look like to envision environments in our schools that enact children’s capabilities as citizens.

I am not the only scholar facing DeCesare’s charge. He is correct that most of the writing in philosophy of education and citizenship education positions children primarily, or perhaps even merely, as learners rather than as making meaningful contributions to our democratic communities. Even the most recent major report on citizenship education, *Educating for Democracy*, presents itself as a “roadmap,” as though citizenship is some destination to reach in the future.² DeCesare is also right that even when we do look at children in the present, we tend to focus more on the educative potential of the present for the future rather than on what children can contribute right now. Our attention tends to be individual-focused, emphasizing how and what children learn now will benefit them personally in their future, rather than outward-focused, highlighting what children can contribute now to democracy and to other citizens.

DeCesare’s piece also draws me back to John Dewey’s claim, “the mistake is not in attaching importance to preparation for future need, but in making it the mainspring of present effort.”³ DeCesare makes me wonder, with Dewey, what we lose out on when our attention is overly or merely on the future of children as adults rather than on their present as child citizens. And,

like Dewey, DeCesare directs us to care about “the conditions which give each present experience a worthwhile meaning.”⁴

CITIZENSHIP AS A MATTER OF JUSTICE

Writing this response makes me realize just how limited our language is.⁵ It is hard to find terms to talk about children and learning relative to democracy that do not express a sense of a child as in development and citizenship as held off for the future. That problem is indicative of how deeply entrenched we are in thinking of children in the “future-” and “deficit-oriented” way that DeCesare describes.

DeCesare gives us grounds for shifting our view by claiming that the inclusion of children is a matter of justice. I will build on those claims only briefly here. This is a matter of justice in both how we understand what democracy ideally should be and in how we carry it out procedurally in real-time. Ideally, democracy is falling short of its promises to provide non-domination and equal political standing amongst all citizens. Procedurally, because children cannot weigh in on issues and decisions that impact their lives, they lack certain types of freedom and self-determination. Moreover, they cannot fully consent to the laws that govern them if they have no say in shaping those laws, causing those laws to fall short of ideal political legitimacy. Finally, whereas commentators on the role of children tend to focus on rights, this is not just a matter of rights but rather of recognition. This includes seeing children as citizens and counting them amongst those whose voices are heard and who are attended to by representatives. This is not just a matter of democratic equality but of moral equality. At the same time, of course, we must be aware that fulfilling justice for children by including them in decision-making may lead to choices that harm others and thereby increase other aspects of injustice.⁶

CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHILDREN

Shifting our perspective on children, as DeCesare goads us to do, is easier when we start by acknowledging what children already contribute to democracy. Amartya Sen’s “enlightenment relevance” and Miranda Fricker’s “epistemic contribution” both reflect a democratic commitment to an array of

diverse perspectives that can contribute to any inquiry into a shared problem or can contribute to the public.⁷ Clearly, it seems that children should be seen as viable candidates for these roles, and they have proven themselves as such on multiple occasions.

As DeCesare rightly attributed to my 2017 book, students can help us better understand what is going on in schools currently and can help us improve them through deliberations regarding curricular and pedagogical practices.⁸ Children have the ability to contribute enlightenment relevance about their school experiences and to shape public deliberations about schools. We have seen them do this at school board meetings and on student councils. Also, in my earlier work on democratic dissent, I argued that children can alert us to problems and put forward potential solutions through public protest.⁹ The Parkland National School Walkout for gun control and Fridays for Future for environmentalism are just two recent examples. Finally, in my more recent work, I point to children as a source of the sort of hopeful imagination and storytelling that gives life to new ideas and new energy to revitalize democracy.¹⁰ Too often, we fear what might result from giving children more decision-making power. Perhaps we might instead open ourselves to the spirit of vision, wonder, and change they bring to the table. Perhaps we might better attend to the questions and challenges they pose to the status quo as those who do not just see it “as the ways it’s always been.”¹¹

DeCesare’s paper pushes us to ask: Might we find ourselves surprised by children if they were invested with more genuine opportunities to participate in democracy? Might they rise to the occasion and prove more worthy than we predicted? Ask any mother of a young child, and she might first scoff with examples of her kid likely unwisely voting for the best NFL quarterback for President, but she will also be able to provide fascinating examples of deep and rich ideas her child has expressed about civic and political life. I know I certainly would.

PROVIDING ENVIRONMENTS WHERE DEMOCRATIC CAPABILITIES ARE ENACTED

DeCesare's greatest provocation is to imagine what it would look like to prepare "democracy itself to accommodate children's participation." In particular, drawing on Martha Nussbaum, he pushes us to consider what we can do to fulfill the capability of children to contribute to democracy by constructing environments that enable children to enact those abilities.¹² This would shift our emphasis from just developing the internal capabilities of children for the future to also providing the conditions that encourage those capabilities to be exercised today.

To begin, we need to make sure that children's participation is legitimate and meaningful. It cannot be just surface level or something we hand over as adults in order to pat ourselves on the back for feeling inclusive yet does not genuinely take up children's ideas or give them power. Proxy voting by parents on behalf of children, which has been proposed by some in response to calls for children's voting rights, seems to fall into this category. This sort of voting does not really engage children in politics and still keeps power within the hands of adults.

To point toward more thorough alternatives, DeCesare draws upon Sen and Nussbaum to reveal that we have focused too much just on developing students' internal capabilities. Rather, we should also consider the conditions in the environment that provide opportunities to engage one's abilities. Hence, DeCesare shifts us to thinking about how we might change the current environment to open more opportunities for democratic and political participation now, for children and, I would add, *as* children—those with a unique position and stake. Then, when we combine the internal capabilities that we have historically focused on in citizenship education with a new form of environment, we will be better posed to *do* democracy now, including with children.

Part of changing the current environment would be developing a new way of seeing children as citizens. This is an important first step not just for us adults but also for children, as it enables them to develop their political identity as

citizens. This shift in how we view identity may better position schools to focus more on nurturing citizenship habits (in the Deweyan sense) that are not held off for future activation but rather are tested and affirmed in the present.¹³ This shift may prevent some of the delayed or lower participation we see amongst those who have recently crossed the threshold to adulthood because children would come to see and inhabit the role of citizen from a much earlier age.

Perhaps one way we might do this is to foreground citizenship not as status or rights but as participating in taking up the fundamental civic question: what should we do? This is a question we must answer whenever we face shared problems or must figure out how to live together. A citizen is too often narrowly defined as a person a government recognizes as a member holding a full set of rights. This emphasizes citizenship as a legal status rather than emphasizing how citizens act—a civic notion of citizenship.¹⁴ Understood as such, a citizen is one who engages in an array of citizenship activities, including taking up the civic question. In a way, this gives us a workaround for those who have become too burdened down with focusing on children's rights and voting.¹⁵ Instead, it emphasizes what children *do* and *can do* in democracy. Problematically, though, it hardly goes far enough in extending the sorts of powerful and meaningful participation that Tony desires.

This proposal fits best with deliberative conceptions of democracy. Deliberative systems theory, in particular, offers a wider take on “what counts” as civic and political participation and the extent of impact such participation may have.¹⁶ Jane Mansbridge defines this system as “a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labor, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole.”¹⁷ This system is not just concerned with formal, traditional deliberation in a dedicated forum but rather looks at multiple and informal locations where ideas are exchanged and developed, including those that supplement other areas that are weak or short-sighted—an especially ripe space for children. The deliberative systems theory helps us to see areas in which children already contribute but also to acknowledge other spaces where they could.

Public protest is one such space. While it does not entail voting or overt

decision-making (the sorts of rights that those who debate the role of children often focus on), it does contribute to consciousness-raising about important issues and putting forward alternatives that may then generate discussion and be picked up by those with the power to make decisions or vote. Schools can serve as environments where children protest and can showcase how the effects of student protest result in improvement.

Children also contribute to transmission, which John Dryzek describes as activities that transmit ideas between one part of the deliberative system and another.¹⁸ Children increasingly contribute to this through their use of social media, where they construct and share memes and posts that reflect on and spark conversation about issues in their worlds. Sometimes, particular kids make a major impact this way, such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai. Schools can be places where children create, exchange, and critique media as a way to contribute to discussions of “What should we do?”

Finally, the same citizenship report mentioned above already acknowledges that students themselves should be a part of sorting out how they should be educated as citizens. So, students are being treated as citizens when they get to be a part of figuring out what we should do when it comes to teaching citizenship.¹⁹ In sum, our schools and communities can provide environments where children contribute through protest, transmission, and even through deliberations about their own education.

1 Tony DeCesare, “The Future Is Now: Rethinking the Role for Children in Democracy,” *Philosophy and Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).

2 Educating for American Democracy (EAD), *Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for all Learners* (2021), <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Educating-for-American-Democracy-Report-Excellence-in-History-and-Civics-for-All-Learners.pdf>,

3 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 9, ed. Jo. Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univer-

sity Press, 1976), 61.

4 John Dewey, "Experience and Education," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 30.

5 Let me be clear that when speaking of children as citizens, I am talking about children from an array of ages but not those so young that they are not able to engage in basic understanding or communication. I recognize that the line here is rather arbitrary and the age may differ from one child to the next.

6 Andrew Rehfeld, "The Child as Democratic Citizen," *American Academy of Political and Social Science* 633, no. 1 (2011): 141-166.

7 Amartya Sen, *The Ideal of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Miranda Fricker, "Epistemic Contribution as a Central Human Capability," in *The Equal Society: Essays on Equality in Theory and Practice*, ed. George Hull (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

8 Sarah M. Stitzlein, *American Public Education and the Responsibility of its Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

9 Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and Political Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

10 Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Schools and Civil Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

11 Kei Nishiyama, "Deliberators, not Future Citizens: Children in Democracy," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 13, no. 1 (2017): 1-26.

12 Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

13 David T. Hansen and Carmen James, "The Importance of Cultivating Democratic Habits in Schools," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 48, no. 1 (2016): 94-112; Kathy Hytten, "Cultivating Democratic Hope in Dark Times: Strategies for Action," *Education & Culture* 35, no. 1 (2019): 3-28; Sarah M. Stitzlein, "Habits of Democracy: A Deweyan Approach to Citizenship in America

Today,” *Education & Culture* 30, no. 2 (2014): 61-86.

14 James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

15 Stefan Olsson, “Children’s Suffrage: A Critique of the Importance of Voters’ Knowledge for the Well-Being of Democracy,” *The International Journal of Children’s Rights* 16, no. 1 (2008): 55-76; Steven Lecce, “Should Democracy Grow Up? Children and Voting Rights,” *Intergenerational Justice Review* 9, no. 4 (2009): 132-138; Robert H. Pantell and Maureen T. Shannon, “Improving Public Policy for Children: A Vote for Each Child,” *Intergenerational Justice Review* 9, no. 4 (2009): 139-143.

16 John S. Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jane Mansbridge, et al., “A Systematic Approach to Deliberative Democracy,” in *Deliberative System: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, eds. J. Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1-26.

17 Mansbridge et al., “A Systematic Approach to Deliberative Democracy,” 4.

18 Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance*.

19 Educating for American Democracy, *Educating for American Democracy*, 16-17.