

BOISI CENTER

INTERVIEWS



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MEIRA LEVINSON is an associate professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** and undergraduate research assistant **Kevin Durazo** before her presentation on youth civic engagement and the “civic empowerment gap” at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: Your new book, *No Citizen Left Behind* [Harvard University Press, 2012] centers around a conception of the “civic empowerment gap.” Could you define that for us and say a bit about its impact?

LEVINSON: The civic empowerment gap, at its most basic level, is a recognition and renaming of a phenomenon that we are all too aware of in the United States, which is that civic and political power in this country is predictably distributed by demographic characteristics. Those who are more highly educated, those who are wealthier, often those who are whiter, those who speak English as their first language, and those who are native-born citizens as opposed to naturalized citizens—on average, those groups have much higher levels of civic and political power than those who do not have those characteristics.

That has been true for many years, even many decades, although it has been exacerbated more recently by growth in economic and educational inequity and so forth. But it hasn’t always been as true as it is now, and that’s not just because of decisions like *Citizens United* or the current increase in economic inequity. It used to be that institutions like labor unions, immigrant incorporation groups, and churches played a much bigger role in bringing those with lower levels of education, with less money, who were

recent immigrants, who are non-white, etc. into the civic and economic fold and giving them access to civic and political power. We don’t have that as much anymore.



This means that we are a relatively anti-democratic country. One of the premises of democracy is “one person, one vote”; that people have some form of equitable political and civic power. Understandably, some will decide to use it and others won’t. But we should not be able to predict who has economic and civic power based on their demographic characteristics alone. Right now we can.

In fact, political and civic participants and institutions in the United States are quite responsive to those who have much greater power, and that means that we undemocratically privilege some demographic groups over others. It also means that we make worse choices. We have worse policies because we hear from and are influenced by a much smaller segment of the population than we should be.

OWENS: You mean the government is less responsive to the needs of unrepresented groups?

LEVINSON: They are less responsive to the needs of unrepresented groups, and even when they try to be responsive to those needs, often at times our policies are more foolish than they should be, because they don’t incorporate the insights and the understanding and the knowledge from those very groups that the policies are trying to help. So it’s not just about who is being paid attention to; it’s also that the democratic decisions that we make tend to be better when they are representative of multiple perspectives, multiple viewpoints and multiple sources of knowledge.

OWENS: How can schools improve the situation?

LEVINSON: I characterize this as a civic empowerment gap as an intentional

play on the language of the “academic achievement gap” that’s received a lot of attention—I think rightly—over the last decade or two. One of the things the academic achievement gap did was to refocus schools and the nation; instead of attributing these inequities in academic achievement to the faults of individual kids and families, we are now taking responsibility for it as a system, institutionally. When we see these patterns replicated again and again and again, we can’t just blame the individual kid and locate the problem in his or her body. Instead, we need to realize that we are doing things systemically that are, at the very least, perpetuating these inequities and possibly exacerbating or causing them. Schools have remarkably and impressively started taking ownership and saying we are responsible for educating all children to a high level.

My argument is that with the civic empowerment gap, we need to take the same kind of institutional, social, civic and national responsibility. When we see these patterns of inequity, we again need to stop locating the problems in the individuals themselves and instead say that as a system, we need to do something about this. There are a lot of things that need to be done and could be done outside of schools, but schools are public institutions that connect to and influence most profoundly the vast majority of citizens in the United States, especially because they serve most low-income citizens of color in the United States. Public schools are one of the best means through which to access this population that is at the losing end of the civic empowerment gap.

Also, schools are themselves models of civic spaces. They help educate kids, whether or not they intend to, into what’s expected about our civic relationships: notions of respect, diversity, plurality, and voice. Finally, public schools were founded in this country with a civic mission. That’s why we fund them. Although they are currently focused with a laser eye on college and career, which are also

essential, they should also be focused on citizenship. It should be college, career and citizenship, not just college and career. This is a historical responsibility of schools, and it’s something that they are particularly well placed to address.

OWENS: You have written about the declining worry in this country about racial segregation and/or concentration, and the impact this lack of concern is having in our schools and society. This reminds me of [Stanford philosopher of education]

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Eamonn Callan’s argument on behalf of “common schools” that are a microcosm of the larger society, as opposed to the frequently segregated public schools. I wonder if you might speak to your thoughts on racial and socioeconomic diversity as part of this civic educational process.

LEVINSON: This actually gets a bit into a chapter I wrote in *Making Civics Count* [Harvard Education Press, 2012], the edited volume that we also had come out last year. Diverse schools, when they are led well and taught well and have the

right kind of school culture, are the best place to combat the civic empowerment gap. However, just because you have a lot of diverse kids in a school building does not mean that they are learning from one another or with one another. Nor are they necessarily learning the right things about one another. So diversity does not automatically equal positive civic culture.

On top of that, it is simply the case that right now in this country there is not serious interest in really integrating schools. So there’s always this question when you do political theory or when you write about public policy, that you ask, “What do I take as a given, and where is it that I’m trying to effect change?” I decided in *No Citizen Left Behind* to take as a given the massive re-segregation of public schools in this country. As unfortunate as I think that is, if we take that as a given, we can also then recognize some opportunities in it: namely, that we actually have very high concentrations of low-income kids of color in a variety of schools across the country, especially but not only in urban areas.

Therefore those schools actually have the greatest opportunity to directly combat the civic empowerment gap, because we can concentrate on those kids who are right now on the losing end. We can say, OK, let’s really focus on helping you become empowered citizens, helping you develop a voice, and helping you think about your role in society in a way that’s not merely demoralizing and discouraging, but offers you a role where you can make a positive difference for your community, for yourself, and for the nation as a whole, in the world. I think, in a way, that’s an exciting opportunity, even if I wish we didn’t have it.

OWENS: Does that give up on the idea that integrating people across socio-economic and racial classes is an indirect way of helping those at the bottom of these academic or civic empowerment gaps?

LEVINSON: No, it's doing both. One is to be quite insistent that merely having black, brown and white children, or poor and wealthy children, in the same school building is not itself true integration. It's not itself truly equalizing and it doesn't itself have true civic salutary consequences. You can bring kids from a poorer, browner neighborhood into a school and a community that is wealthier and whiter, and you can keep those kids separate, you can fail to integrate the parents, and you can have mutual suspicion and mistrust, and I don't think that necessarily does much.

There has also been a strand of research over the last few decades that has been recovering the strengths of *de jure* segregated African-American schools in the South. They are talking about the ways in which they built incredibly strong communities in which the teachers modeled high expectations for kids, in part because they were of the community and believed in the community. What happened, especially during the initial round of desegregation, was that if teachers were fired, it was the African-American teachers who were fired and the white teachers who were retained. As a result, we lost an entire couple of generations of strong teachers of color, and we ended up with many students of color being educated by white teachers, who may or may not have believed in, and/or known how to help kids realize their inherent skills and abilities and powers and so forth.

So I personally do not reject the goals of integrated education, and I'm really impressed by the decades-long work of people like Gary Orfield who have just fought again and again for integrated schools. But it is saying, "That's a fight worth having, but also, here we are with these schools on our plate. What can we do now with these kids in order to try to reduce the civic empowerment gap?"

OWENS: What can you say about the content of civic identity that you're seeking to foster? There is obviously a range

of considerations about coherence, sameness and diversity in a civic education designed to promote a shared national identity.

LEVINSON: This is probably where I get the most controversial. There are a couple of things. One is that I do recommend that we change how we teach American history and in that context how we teach kids about identity. It's in large part because I think that we need to respond to the historical narratives that kids come in with. They don't come in as blank slates. They have views about who they are, what their role is in the nation, and what the nation is and what it stands for. Often, especially poor kids of color coming from predominantly and historically marginalized neighborhoods, they come in viewing the United States as a kind of a nasty place. They don't respond to the historical narrative that talks about how wonderful we are and how we've been getting better all the time. I suggest that, especially in *de facto* segregated schools, we often might want to teach a historical narrative of struggle, opportunity and obligation. The United States represents a history of struggle against oppression, discrimination, and prejudice; and through that struggle, there are real clear opportunities and positive growth. But then all of us as Americans have the obligation to use those opportunities to continue the struggle.

I also argue that we should teach a much more about the power of collective action. Very few people can individually make massive change, but people working together in solidarity can and often have.

Finally, with respect to white students and others, I actually embrace Du Bois' notion of double consciousness and say that we should all adopt a kind of double consciousness and realize that none of us is the norm from which others diverge. We are all diverse peoples in the United States who have particular experiences and particular roles and particular identi-



ties. Those are important and have a role to play, but we can also learn from others.

OWENS: We at the Boisi Center have a special interest in religion. How do education about religion and religious freedom factor into your vision of civic education?

LEVINSON: That's a really interesting question. I'm not sure I've thought about that very much. One of the things that I have thought about is the role that churches have historically played in civic and political incorporation, engagement and power. There clearly are still roles that churches are playing, but it's not as widespread. It's also less equitable, and more polarized and ideological. One of the reasons, therefore, that I argue that schools have a role to play in this work is because churches are playing a less consistent role. In our book *Making Civics Count*, Peter Levine has a chapter that goes through how the civic ecology is changing, including with respect to churches; in this new context, schools have a role to play.

With respect to teaching about religion, public schools have done a horrific job of this for decades upon decades. There are really powerful lessons to learn about how religious communities in this

country, both in solidarity and through partnerships with other religious groups, played a crucial role in many transformations of the country. More generally, I think that to be a literate person and a literate and effective citizen, you actually have to understand basics about religious belief, history, and theology. It's crazy that we don't teach it.

One other thing. One of the anecdotes I relate in the book is about this Orthodox Jewish kid I had, who wanted to do his citizenship project in my eighth grade "Civics in Action" class opposing same-sex marriage rights in Massachusetts. This led to a long discussion between me and my student teacher about whether this was an appropriate thing, not only because we both happened to favor same-sex marriage rights and viewed it as a human right, but also because his project was religiously motivated. We really debated what role his Talmudic arguments could and should play in a civics class and in civic argumentation in a public school.

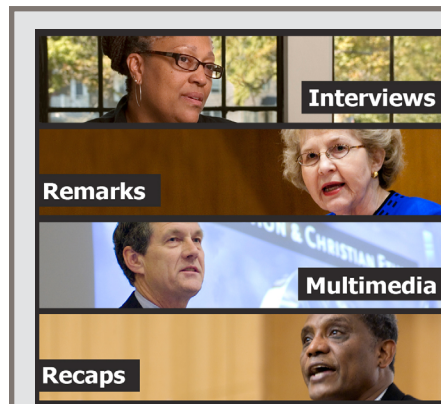
One of the things I argue in the book is that it was appropriate and right for the student to make those kinds of religious arguments. A civic sphere needs to have people who can present their views honestly and transparently. The fact that a set of values and a set of principles comes from a religious base makes it no less worth raising in the public sphere than if it comes from a secular base. Now, others could then reject it. There were no other Jews in the classroom, let alone Orthodox Jews, and I don't think that Talmudic references would have carried the day. Regardless, however, I think he had a perfect right to make these arguments, even in a public school classroom. In this respect, I reject Rawlsian public reason, as I discuss further in the book.

DURAZO: Your critical assessment of service-oriented civic action reminded me of the saying, "When you feed the poor, you're called a saint; when you ask why they're hungry, you're called

a communist." Do you see service-oriented civic action as fostering solidarity in the community, which then kind of empowers civic action as a next step after service? Or is there a kind of dichotomy?

LEVINSON: That's a good question. I certainly don't see it as a dichotomy where if you're teaching service you're harming kids in terms of thinking about communal membership and solidarity. The question is, do you take that next step or not? I think that we often don't, and that the way we teach service learning doesn't push kids to do that. In a way, it builds either self-satisfaction or a misunderstanding that citizenship is only about doing a park cleanup or whatever. It's not that they are diametrically opposed; it's just that if we're really going to be serious about doing civic education, then it has to get beyond service.

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