

## **Building Kids' Citizenship through Community Engagement**

Bob Coulter (2018)

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In *Building Kids' Citizenship Through Community Engagement*, Bob Coulter creates space for educators of all stripes to explore approaches to place-based education and citizen science projects that cultivate young people's co-constructive roles in classrooms, schools, and communities. His book draws on the well of John Dewey's works and offers a seminar on Deweyian thought and its implications in contemporary educational settings. Coulter reminds readers of a fundamental goal for education in the eyes of Dewey: developing people's capacities to meaningfully engage with and improve the communities in which they live.

Coulter directs the Litzsinger Road Ecology Center at the Missouri Botanical Garden, a role he fills after decades of service as a math and science teacher in a variety of educational environments, including public and private elementary schools, and extracurricular programs. The wealth and diversity of his teaching experiences buttress the arguments and practical examples in his book.

Over the course of four chapters, Coulter reviews the benefits and challenges of place-based education for both teachers and students. In the first chapter, he outlines the educational context common in American schools that he revisits throughout the text: educational institutions, practices, and technologies have diminished opportunities to cultivate students' intrinsic motivation for self-formation and service to one's community. Coulter builds on Pasi Sahlberg's (2012) critique of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) and recommends the Dewey-promoted concept of *bildung* as a vaccination to protect current and future generations of teachers and learners from the viruses of corporate, profit-driven curriculum and standardized testing void of connection to local contexts and students' needs. The goal of *bildung*, according to Coulter, is to foster democratic engagement through self-formation in a manner that enables people to "serve both themselves and their community as they grow, develop new skills, and find ways to critique and improve their communities" (p. 80). In the second chapter, Coulter addresses fundamental concepts in learning from Dewey's perspective, including *experience* and *growth*. Here, Coulter argues for creating educational experiences within students' communities in order to bridge life at school with life at home. In this way, the activities are substantive and meaningful for young people's personal growth, rather than singular and siloed within the classroom context. In the third chapter, Coulter interrogates fundamental questions of when and how educators should incorporate digital technologies into curriculum. He argues for maintaining pedagogic judgement for when technology—broadly defined from calculators to geographic information systems computer software—serve more as a distraction than a tool servicing learning and community engagement. Via commentary on the work of David Gauntlett (2014) and others, Coulter operationalizes a framework for assessing digital educational tools, such as a low entry level for skills, a tool that

grows with the person, and a belief in the value of creative play. The fourth chapter briefly recounts key arguments and literature supportive of moving from the GERM approach to the *bildung* approach. To conclude his book, Coulter reviews Scot Osterweil's (2007) *Four Freedoms of Play*, such as freedom to fail, which he argues moves conceptualizations of young people as passive recipients of knowledge toward engaged actors in constructing knowledge and their own educational opportunities.

In addition to drawing on the seminal works of Dewey, Coulter references recent empirical research from psychology, sociology, and other education-focused fields to support his claims about the fundamentals of learning and the state of education in the United States of America. Rather than offer new theoretical pathways or empirical evidence, the merit of Coulter's book is in the inspirational and practical examples for how to cultivate place-based educational opportunities. The arguments for why these opportunities promote young people's engagement with their community are well known in field of environmental education and found in range of relevant texts. Of note is Coulter's reference to the work of Roger Hart (1997) and the ladder of children's participation, which Coulter draws on periodically to interrogate the power dynamics among children and adults in community-based projects. Readers interested in Coulter and Hart's texts may also find useful the work of Colin Ward and his book, *Streetwork: The Exploding School*, in which he and Anthony Fyson also lay out a theory and practice for embedding students' educational experiences directly within the environments where they live (Ward & Fyson, 1973). A more contemporary relevant work is Bronwyn Hayward's (2012) *Children, Environment and Citizenship: Nurturing a Democratic Imagination in a Changing World*, where she connects the practices and goals of environmental movements to the social and economic equity movements in her home nation of New Zealand and abroad. Hayward provides an overarching framework she dubs the SEEDS model of ecological citizenship education—the acronym referring to Social agency, Environmental education, Embedded justice, Decentered deliberative democracy, Self-transcendence.

Of concern to the works of Hart, Ward, and Hayward, and what deserves further exploration in what Coulter offers, are how the mechanisms of local governance—such as local planning authorities or political movements—interface with teachers and students in schools. This discussion is central to operationalizing childhood citizenship but is largely left untouched in Coulter's book, which is unexpected given its prominence of children's citizenship in the title of his work. This limitation aside, Coulter provides a wealth of examples for educators looking to provide more meaningful connections between young people's educational experiences and their everyday lives. The book is inspirational and concise, which makes it an ideal text for advanced undergraduate and graduate coursework in teacher education programs. It may also serve a wider audience of readers interested in cultivating young people's engagement in community planning through place-based education, including parents, new and veteran primary and secondary school teachers, as well as staff at parks, museums, and other cultural institutions with educational programs interfacing with the local environment.

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Review by Bijan Kimiagar

**Bijan Kimiagar** the Associate Executive Director for Research at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York where he leads a team producing data resources, reports, and community-based participatory projects that inform the development of local and statewide policies relevant to children and their families. He received his doctorate in Environmental Psychology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York where he is also a Research Affiliate with the Children's Environments Research Group. His research examines the theory and practice of children's meaningful participation in local governance structures, including how their participation relates to contemporary and changing views on children's capacities as citizens.

## Author's Response

First, I would like to thank Bijan for his careful reading. It is rare for an author to receive such detailed consideration. I'm very appreciative.

At the broadest level, yes—the core argument of the book is that education should develop kids' capacities to engage with the communities in which they live. This might include the classroom, the school, the neighborhood, or beyond. While this should be self-evident, it proves to be surprisingly difficult and countercultural. Much of what I wrote focuses on individual creativity and resilience in response to

school norms, but ideally the book would be more analytical concerning the systemic obstacles which make engagement so difficult. Shortly after completing the manuscript I began work on a district-wide science education reform effort. If the book ever reaches a second edition, I now have a lot more to say! Our efforts to build civic engagement through the science curriculum proved to be difficult when prescriptive schedules precluded going outside. With that, time was often not available for writing about community issues, since writing exercises were pre-determined at the district level. In response, I've started to advocate for focusing on what we *build* in terms of young peoples' identities and capacities, rather than on what we *cover* in the curriculum. This focus on building, of course, invites revisiting (and revitalizing) constructivist and constructionist frames of learning, as well as consideration of insights emerging from neuroplasticity research. At the risk of over-simplifying, it's becoming increasingly clear that our neural structures are shaped by our childhood experiences.

While I agree with much of what Bijan has noted, I do have a couple of clarifications. First, while there is a great deal of conceptual overlap between Dewey's arguments for educative experiences and frames of *bildung* (roughly translated as self-development), I'm not aware of Dewey specifically promoting *bildung* as a concept. More generally, I would like to clarify what I am after in promoting citizenship. While engagement in civic processes and politics can be valuable, much of what I argue for is grounded in a more foundational frame of citizenship. My focus is on being an active and contributing part of the spaces and networks we are part of, which may or may not broach the political realm. For example, projects we support include efforts to promote biodiversity through native plantings and other habitat improvements. Here the focus is on helping kids see the world more clearly and deciding what we can do personally and collectively to make a difference. Implicit in this is a mindset simply to engage constructively. Perhaps we can consider this "citizenship in a low key." While there are certainly instances where students have sought to change others' practices and points of view, I'm not sure this is a requirement for early stages of democratic citizenship. For many teachers and schools, supporting this citizenship in a low key is where they are right now. We do, of course, support them as they grow toward more adventurous steps.