

Education, civic empowerment, and race:

Commentary on Meira Levinson's *No Citizen Left Behind*

By Zachary Hoskins

Meira Levinson's *No Citizen Left Behind* is a provocative, wide-ranging look at the state of civic education in U.S. schools. Citing a wealth of empirical data, Levinson argues that there is a "civic empowerment gap" between "ethnoracial minority, naturalized, and especially poor citizens, on the one hand, and White, native-born, and especially middle-class and wealthy citizens, on the other" (32). As evidence of this gap, she notes that poor, non-White students tend to score lower than more affluent White students on assessments of civic knowledge, and that non-White residents vote, volunteer, and participate in other civic activities in lower percentages than Whites. There are myriad reasons for the civic empowerment gap. Admirably, Levinson recognizes that schools are not the only determinant of civic empowerment; but schools are an important piece of the puzzle, and Levinson's background as an educator and philosopher makes her well-suited to diagnose the challenges and suggest solutions. The result is a book that is ambitious in its scope, widely accessible, and philosophically rich.

The book's scope is both one of its virtues and also a challenge for a discussant charged with delivering a relatively brief commentary. The job is only made harder because I find myself so sympathetic to most of what Levinson writes. In what follows, however, I will raise questions about a few of her prescriptions.

A central theme of the book is that if we want young people to develop the skills and dispositions that will allow them to be active, engaged citizens, then schools must provide them with regular opportunities for authentic civic deliberation and engagement. Another key theme is that schools primarily serving African-American, Hispanic, non-native, or low-income students are

doing an especially poor job in this regard. Levinson thus calls for a change in classrooms' "culture and climate so they become more open to and inclusive of students' own voices" (194).

Students need to experience their thoughts and opinions being treated as relevant rather than as beside the point, as worthy of careful discussion and examination — including being worthy of serious disagreement and challenge — rather than as pesky, inappropriate distractions from or even intrusions upon real "learning." Minimally, this means that actual discussions, where students express and defend opinions, listen to others do the same, and do so in a context of mutual respect and engagement, should be relatively common features of classroom life" (ibid.).

This just seems obviously right to me. One reason I fell in love with philosophy as an undergraduate was that my philosophy courses allowed, even required, this sort of critical scrutiny of my own and my classmates' views in ways that my middle school and even high school courses had not really done, and it has always seemed to me that middle school and high school students would benefit from more of these opportunities. As a biographical note, my middle school and high school were composed almost entirely of White, middle-class students. Thus I suspect that although the failure to encourage engaged, critical discussion of students' ideas may be an especially significant problem in schools serving non-White, low-income communities, it is unfortunately a fairly common problem more generally.

Giving students the opportunities for civic engagement goes well beyond fostering critical deliberation in classrooms, Levinson contends. Students must be given opportunities to become self-regulating members of their community, and rules that tightly constrain students' movement within the classroom or around the school, or their bathroom privileges, or that require them to undergo weapons screening before entering the school building undermine students' abilities to develop their own capacities of self-regulation. "In controlling students' movements and even their physical bodies in these ways," she writes, "we were teaching them our poor opinion of their potential for responsible and self-regulating behavior" (178). Levinson describes these rules as examples of racial "microaggressions" perpetrated by schools against their students: "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities,

whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (176).

I’m not convinced that the sorts of rules Levinson cites constitute racial microaggressions, or microaggressions at all. As to their racial aspect, again I have only my own experience to appeal to, but regulations on movement within classrooms and around the school were commonplace when I was a student. Levinson writes that White and middle-class students “are four to ten times less likely to be subject to such policies,” so perhaps my anecdotal evidence is not generalizable, although it is ambiguous in this passage whether she is referring to restrictive policies generally or only to weapons screening in particular.

As a more general point, however, it’s not clear to me that restrictive school policies necessarily constitute microaggressions, in the sense of communicating hostile or derogatory messages that schools see students generally as unable to regulate their own behavior. If this is the message being sent, and if it is a reason to abandon such rules, then this conclusion has implications that extend much more broadly than in the context of education. The state regulates the behavior of adult citizens in countless ways: from speed limits while driving, to weapons screening at airports or government buildings, to safety rails keeping tourists a safe distance away from the edges of scenic overlooks.

It is possible, of course, that the message being communicated by the state in setting speed limits, or in requiring weapons checks, or in constructing safety rails, is that it has a low opinion of citizens’ abilities to regulate their own behavior. It is also possible that these measures communicate that citizens’ safety and security are important values of the political community, and of the state as its agent — and that although many (perhaps most) of us can be trusted in many (perhaps most) occasions to behave in responsible ways, we are all imperfect beings, subject to moments of recklessness, shortsightedness, or weak will, such that imposing certain restrictions as safeguards is a sensible way of helping to ensure our well-being.

If the state is in many cases justified in regulating citizens' behaviors in various ways, then it seems that schools are similarly justified in regulating students' behaviors. Indeed, regulation would seem more justified, because adolescents are in general less developed in their capacities for autonomous prudential or moral agency. Of course, Levinson's point is that if we want young people to develop these capacities, we need to allow them authentic opportunities to do so. She writes:

[O]ur students had no opportunities to learn from their mistakes because they were denied the opportunity to make such mistakes. Our students also had no opportunities to practice and model success because they were denied the freedom to make choices that could enable success (178-79).

It seems, though, that a balance could be struck that gives students genuine opportunities to develop self-regulative capacities while significantly restricting their behaviors in ways consistent with the recognition that these capacities for self-regulation are still far from fully developed. (Where to strike such a balance presumably depends in part on the age of the students in question, although Levinson does not explicitly address in this book the extent to which her prescriptions are age-sensitive, so that degrees of autonomy appropriate, say, for juniors in high school may not be appropriate for third-graders.) In many cases, restrictions may be seen as conducive to providing an environment in which students can develop as autonomous citizens. In discussing weapons screening, for example, Levinson acknowledges that students might view this measure as an indication that school officials value their safety and security — that these officials aim to provide a safe haven from the dangers of the outside world (181).

Of course, one way to give students an authentic opportunity for civic engagement would be to give them a voice in shaping school policies regarding various restrictive measures. Levinson seems to endorse this sort of student governance as an important element of civic empowerment. "Participatory experiences in schools," she writes, "are among the most important predictors of future civic engagement. ... When our student council found its greatest purpose in organizing a Valentine's Day fundraiser, rather than in any form of collective governance, they lost the

opportunity to practice democracy” (180). The crucial element, for Levinson, is that participatory experiences must be *authentic*. Authenticity matters, she writes, “because only authentic experiences will fully convince students that they can and should ‘soar into’ this new world of empowering civic engagement” (187).

[M]ere pretences to empowering civic experiences will not convince young people that they are truly efficacious and responsible civic actors. Simulated experiences may help students develop the civic skills needed to reduce the civic empowerment gap. But authentic experiences are necessary to help them develop the engaged and efficacious identities, as well as the habits of action, that predict civic engagement and empowerment (ibid.).

This is a powerful defense of authentic opportunities for civic engagement. It is interesting, however, that the most prominent example Levinson relates of an empowering civic experience for students is the class field trip for her eighth-grade American history students to serve as jurors in mock trials at Harvard Law School. Mock trials are, by definition, not authentic: The lawyers are not licensed attorneys, but rather are law students; and most importantly, no one’s liberty is actually on the line. Like Model United Nations and other similar programs, mock trials are simulations. If civic education requires that students be exposed to authentic experiences, then, why not provide actually authentic experiences? Why not empanel them on real juries? The reason, presumably, is that we do not believe young people have sufficiently developed their capacities of moral and legal judgment, and so we do not think it wise to put defendants’ liberty in their hands.

I think simulated civic experiences are fine as a teaching tool, as a way of preparing students for the real thing, so to speak. This is consistent with acknowledging that simulations, to be effective, should track the actual authentic experience in the relevant ways as much as possible. Flight simulators aim to reconstruct the conditions of flight as accurately as possible without having to send inadequately trained pilots up in the air. The point for our purposes is that simulated civic experiences can play a valuable role: They give students a chance to practice, to make mistakes, and to learn from their mistakes in a setting where the stakes are comparatively low. Perhaps Levinson would agree with this. But it sometimes feels (mock trial example notwithstanding) as though she

regards as insufficient any form of engagement that is less than fully authentic. If we want our students to learn to govern themselves, then we must let them govern themselves. Maybe I'm too pessimistic about the capacities of young people for self-legislation — and maybe this is partly because I remember what I was like, my motivations and dispositions, as a 12- or 13-year-old. But if we go too far in the interests of providing students with authentic opportunities for self-governance, I fear we'll be much like the swimming instructor who simply throws the student into the pool; there may be much to be said for this “sink or swim” method of learning by doing — except, of course, when the student sinks.

Finally, a thought about “codeswitching.” This is a skill that Levinson endorses teaching to minority students, by which they learn to represent and express themselves “in ways that members of the majority group — those with political privilege and power — will naturally understand and respect” (87). Codeswitching involves mastering the majority’s “specific grammatical constructions, rhetorical devices, vocabulary, narrative or expository forms, clothing, body language, and other aspects of personal appearance” as well as “substantive cultural, political, and experiential referents” (ibid.).

I was surprised that Levinson endorsed teaching minority students the skill of codeswitching. It's not that I don't recognize the practical value of being able to speak, dress, and behave in the manner of the dominant group. Rather, it seems to me that it is unfair to ask minority students to master and practice this skill. First, notice that codeswitching is asymmetrical: It asks minority students to master the language, appearance, and behaviors of the dominant group; there is no corresponding proposal that wealthy White students should learn the grammatical constructions and vocabulary of Black English, or non-White manners of dress or body language. Given the commitment of time and energy required to master the skill of codeswitching, we should expect that there will be corresponding opportunity costs — opportunities that minorities will have

to pass up but on which their White counterparts, who don't have to spend time mastering another group's behaviors, will not miss out.

Why, then, should we think it fair to ask non-White, low-income students to master the skill of codeswitching? It might be fair to ask this if the dominant group's patterns of speech, dress, or behavior were somehow inherently superior. But as Levinson contends, this is not the case. In discussing the "cultural and hence civic and political bias toward White middle-class norms" (75), she writes: "There is no inherent superiority in wearing pants that have narrow, straight legs rather than legs that bag and bunch. ... No more information is conveyed by explaining 'I did that already' in Standard American English than by explaining 'I been done that' in Black English, assuming the listener understands both" (ibid.). I would add that the unfairness of privileging White patterns of dress or cultural referents seems especially unfair given the often egregious history of how White culture became dominant in the United States.

There is, of course, the practical consideration that one language will often be dominant in a society, so that getting by will require that a person have at least a significant degree of mastery of that language. But codeswitching as Levinson describes it goes further than merely a sufficient mastery of the dominant group's speech to be able to communicate adequately. Codeswitching also involves mastering dress patterns, body language, and political and cultural referents. Similar dress patterns, for example, do not seem to be practical necessities for the social cooperation on which polities are based. Rather, if there is any disadvantage to dressing differently from the dominant group, it would seem to be a consequence of the often unjustified biases that frame how many affluent White citizens interpret certain forms of dress (hooded sweatshirts, for instance).

Given the unfairness of asking minority students to invest significant time and energy in mastering a skill that we don't ask White students similarly to master, why endorse codeswitching? The obvious answer seems to be that, given our society as it is — given the prevailing, biased social practices, institutions, and attitudes — there is prudential value for minority students in learning to

play by the social rules as they are. Indeed, by learning strategically to adopt the behaviors that will allow them to succeed in society, young people may empower themselves eventually to help change the social norms. This may be so. But we should recognize the costs associated with such a strategy. Aside from the basic unfairness that I've discussed, an additional worry is that by asking minority students to conform their behaviors to the dominant group's norms, we risk giving our imprimatur to the dominant norms, and we may thereby forestall important conversations about the unjust cultural biases reflected and expressed by these norms.

Despite the critiques I've raised here, I think *No Citizen Left Behind* makes a seminal contribution to discussions of educating for civic engagement in liberal democracies. This is a book that will change the conversation, both among social philosophers concerned about civic participation and education, and also among educators and the public more generally. It is, in short, an outstanding example of applied social philosophy.