Grow Good Citizens

Educating for Civic Hearts and Minds in a Complex Democracy

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Abstract: Grow Good Citizens outlines how educators can guide the development of civic values, civic-mindedness, and, ultimately, the civic heart of a child. This developmental framework lays the groundwork to recognize and employ those small learning moments when values are in conflict and students are ready to grapple with the complexities of democracy.

INTRODUCTION

It is time to reimagine Democracy. Imagine citizens putting into practice an inclusive Democracy incorporating respect for diverse viewpoints as well as collaborative and cooperative decision-making (Levy, Ramakrishnan, Gibbs, & Cross, 2015). These essential principles may be taught in both formal education, the classroom, and informal education, on the playground and beyond. Educators can transfer knowledge and model practices that support the development of civic-mindedness: Positive lessons of inclusive good citizenship can ignite social action; whereas negative or narrow lessons can dull the desire to participate.

In this paper, *good* citizenship is thought of in the same way John Lewis uses the term 'good' in his quote: "Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America" (Lewis, 2020). Good citizenship is multi-dimensional, both a personal and communal experience, often invigorating, and usually complicated. Educators can intentionally use little moments of conflicting values as teachable civic moments, lean into discomfort, and get into *good* trouble.

Teachers work hard to build their skills and awareness so that they can do their part to help a democracy thrive. Each child's developing, healthy civic mindset needs opportunities to imagine, learn, practice, reflect, lead, and innovate inside and out of school. With an increased understanding of the innate plasticity of human development and behavior (Lifton, 1999, Belsky & Pluess 2009), educators are better equipped to recognize and put to good use the small moments of big impact for the children they teach.

How can teachers model good citizenship, emulate collective decision-making and respect for diverse viewpoints? How can adults best foster a democratic social consciousness and thus the growth of good citizenship in children? To answer these questions, the authors drew from research in the fields of developmental psychology,

neuroscience, education sciences, and critical social-cultural studies to develop a framework that demonstrates a progression of civic engagement from children's earliest experiences to their entry into adulthood. At each stage, a child's developing, healthy civic mindset needs opportunities to imagine, learn, practice, reflect, lead, and innovate inside and out of school. With an increased understanding of the innate plasticity of human development and behavior (Lifton, 1999, Belsky & Pluess 2009), educators are better equipped to recognize and put to good use the small moments of big impact for the children they teach.

A civic identity evolves as one matures emotionally and intellectually: exercising one's productive voice; bolstering one's empathy; recognizing injustice; appreciating freedoms; adapting to new ideas or information; and embracing a sense of responsibility. This framework illustrates four distinct stages of civic development that follow the major shifts in physical, intellectual, and emotional development as a child grows from ages zero to 18+: Beginning in Early Childhood, moving through Elementary and Middle Childhood, and entering adulthood from the High School years, each stage offers unique opportunities to develop skills for civic engagement (Figure 1). Everyday situations illustrate how children, when faced with the tension of competing values, must figure out solutions that reestablish self-harmony. Managing friction is essential in the maturing of civic-mindedness and sophistication of civic actions. The Grow Good Citizens framework offers a lens to recognize, from the moment a child is born to the day they vote for the first time (and every day in between and afterward) how they develop their civic hearts and minds.

Figure 1:

Four Civic Developmental Stages: Finding the Balance of Community and Personal Civic Values

All children require age-appropriate support to navigate their world as it becomes increasingly complex. Children grasp the core principles of democracy when they engage in collective decision-making that respects diverse viewpoints. In that way democracy is an organic process of growth; brains at every age naturally seek to reduce discomfort and restore balance leading to behavior alteration and knowledge development (Piaget, 1929). Learning occurs as children recognize they must make a choice, they have conflicting feelings, tensions, and experience cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). Discomfort presents an opportunity for children to recognize that they are challenged to adapt, to increase coping and decision-making skills to respond to the situation and environment (Kaaronen, 2018). As young people grow and move between familiar and new spaces, their response to discomfort shifts and neurological patterns are shaped as they expand their repertoire of coping and decision-making skills. Their experiences stretch their worldviews, deepen and enrich their ability to understand complex problems, and build confidence. All of this effort trains the muscle of their civic heart.

In the charts below, tensions of conflicting democratic principles are explored for each developmental stage. The ‘collective’ column describes the need for interdependence that is both contextual and dependent on community values especially in times of change. In contrast, the next column – individual agency – describes a child’s autonomy, perspective, or personal civic values throughout the stages. The examples of conflicting values in the final column demonstrate tensions of everyday conflicts that lead to the growth of civic-mindedness.

1. Early Childhood:

From birth to age four, children are developing at a rapid rate. At this critical developmental stage, they are learning language, identifying feelings, and building

relational intelligence. They are learning to purposefully interact with the people in their life, often resulting in misunderstandings about needs and intentions. Even in this earliest stage of civic capacities development, learning includes the mental and emotional discomfort that can come from interpersonal and relational skills. It is in that discomfort that young children begin to build the skills for civic engagement.

Table 1. Stage 1 of Conflicting Democratic Principles

Civic development stage	Age/ Characteristic Identity Trait	Collective values	Individual values	Daily Examples of Conflicting Values
Early Childhood	0-2 yrs <i>Discoverers</i>	Physical and emotional needs met by caregivers	Expresses unique wants	Reaching out for support vs. wanting to walk independently
	2-4 yrs <i>Comparers</i>	Plays, connects, empathizes with others	Pretends, narrates, and creates own joy	Wanting to play with others vs. not wanting to share a favorite toy

Tanya, a three-year-old, is finding worth in her voice and preferences. At preschool one morning she is playing with a set of trucks and driving them down a ramp. As other children arrive, they first watch, then join her in rolling the trucks down the ramp. A child picks up the biggest truck from the bottom of the ramp and starts driving it around the floor. Tanya takes the truck back angrily: “No, go down the mountain.”

Even at this young age, children face dilemmas. Tanya wants to continue the activity she started, removing a truck from play disrupts the story she is creating. Educators can help resolve conflicts peacefully by acknowledging, naming, and normalizing ‘big

feelings' and then supporting each child to work through the issue. Adults can support development by listening closely to what the young child is expressing, responding to their needs, and engaging in conversations that clearly are important to them. One way to do this is to engage in storytelling that makes stressful experiences resolvable by the child. This helps build resilience and confidence as they explore the world. Educators of young children can use the strategy of teaching through play to support young children to learn turn-taking, fairness, and social justice.

2. Elementary:

Between the ages of four and ten, students develop their voice as well as their ability to articulate feelings and ideas. They develop a sense of belonging, rooted in forming alliances and camaraderie, with that comes competition and possibly alienation. In school, children can learn to question assumptions, expand perspectives, and change their conclusions after learning new evidence and discussing others' opinions.

Table 2. Stage 2 of Conflicting Democratic Principles

Civic Development Stage	Age/ Characteristic Identity Trait	Collective Values	Individual Values	Daily Examples of Conflicting Values
Elementary	4-6 yrs <i>Explorers</i>	Participates in formal and informal group activities	Understands fairness	Desire to please others vs. wanting to be first
	6-8 yrs <i>Questioners</i>	Explores and respects similarities and differences	Questions and recognizes perspectives	Creating a secret club vs. leaving other friends out
	8-10 yrs	Positively impacts others by taking	Aware of rights and reflects on	Supporting peers in a dispute vs.

	<i>Problem Solvers</i>	action	impacts	wanting to be proven right
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David's second grade class is collecting mittens for the homeless. Each classroom has the goal of collecting 20 pairs. When filling in a chart for each pair of mittens collected, the class realized they were short by two pairs! José was able to bring in a pair of mittens but really wants to keep them for himself. He colors in the chart but places the new mittens in his pocket. "I deserve these more and no one will notice that they are gone."

Children have many opposing thoughts and feelings. It helps to give them opportunities to sort out and order these feelings. Like David, children are often stymied when in the midst of an emotional or nuanced situation. Children are prepared to cope with future stressful situations by learning that a problem can have more than one solution. As students grow in their understanding of the needs of self and others, adults can help them practice activism, unpack complex issues, listen deeply to others, and act in socially just ways. Adults can model compassion and can normalize differences by showing acceptance and respect for people, or ideas, that may feel different from their own values. Teachers can also demonstrate democratic civics through the books and videos they choose to share, by implementing democratic practices in their classroom, by culturally responsive teaching, by building strong relationships, and by affirming acts of kindness.

3. The Middle Years:

Pre-teens and teens begin to understand and reflect on the complexities of the world around them. Students at this stage are able to consider abstract and indirect problems and answers. They question the status quo and are able to recognize injustice and seek support to make change. Puberty often adds emotional swings, self-doubt, and impulsive behavior. As a result, they use language in creative ways and can imagine

different responses to situations. They will challenge adults about situations they consider unfair but keep silent when a peer whom they admire offends them. They are concerned about justice, about doing what feels right. In the middle years, students are open and eager to learn advocacy skills.

Table 3. Stage 3 of Conflicting Democratic Principles

Civic Development Stage	Age/ Characteristic Identity Trait	Collective Values	Individual Values	Daily Examples of Conflicting Values
Middle Years	10-12 yrs <i>Reasoners</i>	Includes others in groups, teams, classroom, clubs, etc.	Speaks up for views and justice	Is elected captain of team vs. silence when players act disrespectful
	12-14 yrs <i>Designers</i>	Establishes meaningful social connections outside family	Takes risks and builds independence	Establishes diverse friendships vs. conflicting cultural norms
	14-16 yrs <i>Researchers</i>	Responsibly engages in communities or organizations	Fulfills roles and develops identity	Contributions recognized vs. feeling like an outsider

As Aisha moves into the middle years, her peers play an important role in her understanding of abstract concepts like liberty and responsibility. At 12, Shreya is elected to the Middle School student council. She loves the responsibility until she needs to preside over a disciplinary hearing. The issue becomes heated and divisive. Aisha's frustration is clear when she exclaims, "Democracy is too complicated".

During these middle years students, like Aisha, express their compassionate citizenship. Teachers can support civic-mindedness at this stage by connecting the important content of standard social studies curriculum directly to students' lived lives. Adults can encourage agency and acknowledge that changing one's opinion is normal and healthy. In a safe environment, students develop muscle memory for resolving conflicting values even when participating is uncomfortable. Teachers can help pre-teens productively navigate peer relationships and influences by honoring unsettling ideas and feelings of isolation. By asking 'the what, why, and how' during relevant teachable moments with students, educators can provide a routine for thinking about actions and beliefs and so nurture the development of active democratic civic thinkers and doers.

4. High School and Beyond:

As students prepare to leave high school and enter adult life, they are developmentally able to plan, execute, and reflect on civic actions. They can understand the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of citizenship. Students are able to see the positive and negative impacts of their choices and the choices of others. They grapple with how to fight for social justice with conflicting ideals that support identity development. In fact, young adults want to show they can make a difference in small and big ways. They value recognition and are motivated by a newly discovered agency.

Table 4. Stage 4 of Conflicting Democratic Principles:

Civic Development Stage	Age/ Characteristic Identity Trait	Collective Values	Individual Values	Daily Examples of Conflicting Values
High School and Beyond	16-18 yrs <i>Critical Thinkers</i>	Works with others to contribute to local and global communities	Generous, altruistic and selfless acts without needing recognition	Afraid to ask for help vs. wanting to feel effective

	18+ <i>Activists</i>	Develops social contracts that act on shared principles	Confident in self in relation to social mores	Resists being judged poorly by peers vs. the impulse to break a norm
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As Michelle navigates her high school years, her civic ideals are, at times, in conflict with the ideals of others she cares about. Her parents forbid her to skip school to participate in a climate protest. She feels strongly about the impact her actions, choices, and words can make on the world around her. Michelle disobeys her parents and joins the protest stating her motivation, "If I do nothing, people will continue to suffer."

During this learning stage, Michelle and others seek to develop more significant intergenerational relationships and to create opportunities for discourse to learn from the challenges of the past and build hope for the future. Educators can support young adults by creating opportunities for struggle with opposing perspectives in school through literature, debate, and science. Teachers can model for teens how to tackle tough problems. By sharing role models of others who impact positive change through selfless actions, for instance, the teen may start to value a balance between self-recognition and the greater good. Each individual continues to learn about civic engagement in new ways they may not recognize. This process of learning about civic life and the plasticity of human development exists throughout their adult years.

DISCUSSION

Schools have the imperative to develop good citizens who are eager to create a more just and free society. With an understanding of the ways that individuals develop and participate in our democracy, schools can become safe vehicles where students harness their knowledge and skills as citizens. Students learn civic-mindedness through

daily opportunities, as illustrated in this article, to make their school and their community a healthy, productive, and positive place for everyone, at every age.

Conversely, democracy is at risk when education furthers oppression. A school that recognizes that students' collective actions and choices must emerge from a complex set of freely-held beliefs cultivates democracy. Children might have more than one community or country or set of values in their lives. It is when children's unique identities are ignored that it may lead to failed or ambivalent citizenship (Banks, 2017).

Traditionally schools teach in a duality mode of right and wrong, facts and fiction, however, in teaching civic-mindedness, it is important to encourage flexibility, questioning, risk-taking, and reflection: to recognize and resolve, if possible, contradictions and dualities.

A democratic classroom honors the values of all individuals and groups of individuals even though values conflict when:

- Students are encouraged to bring their whole selves to the classroom and become co-creators of their learning.
- All children feel included and valued.
- Mistakes are celebrated as learning opportunities.
- Teachers resist fixing issues for children and, instead, support students to recognize their agency.
- Individuals learn to appreciate and navigate the impact of conflicting values.
- Children develop civic identities and acceptance as they play and learn in school.
- Children are encouraged to make informed choices and question the status quo.

Simply stated: effective civics education encourages children at all ages to develop skills to grow to be compassionate, critical thinkers and doers. Teachable moments arise when educators recognize opportunities to unpack competing values inside and outside their classrooms, to take a potentially negative situation and work together to create a just outcome. When supported, this grappling leads to reflection, invites inquiry,

and generates deeper understanding. It leads to the development of self-awareness, about one's character, and one's self-worth. With self-confidence, children are better able to listen compassionately to and respect the opinions of others, fully engaging their civic heart.

John Dewey said "Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is the midwife" (Dewey, 1916). Inferred in this statement is that, in teaching about the richness of pluralistic views and their own competing values, students may better learn to problem-solve and lead. Educators can guide students to listen, discuss, and examine their thinking as they meet children where they are, individually, and thus advance them to greater civic action. Educators can dare to imagine, with young children through young adults, of a democracy that is inclusive and works for all, co-creating an 'arc of social dreaming' (McLaren, 2016) .

It is an exciting time to be an educator, a role model supporting student voice and agency. It is a time of national debate, civic challenge, educational reform, and civic reimagination. It is a time for learning communities to lean into the discomfort of conflicting values in order to learn together. Schools can further their democratic education mission through incorporating mindful civic action-practices. Teachers are committed to providing education that meets the child where they are in hopes of getting in *good* trouble. Without solving the problem for the child, teachers recognize and support those small learning moments when values are in conflict and students are ready to grapple with the complexities of democracy. Through inclusive methods, restorative practices, respect for the child's development, valuing the community's culture, and by encouraging each student's voice and choice, teachers foster the development of civic hearts and minds.

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