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# boisi center interviews

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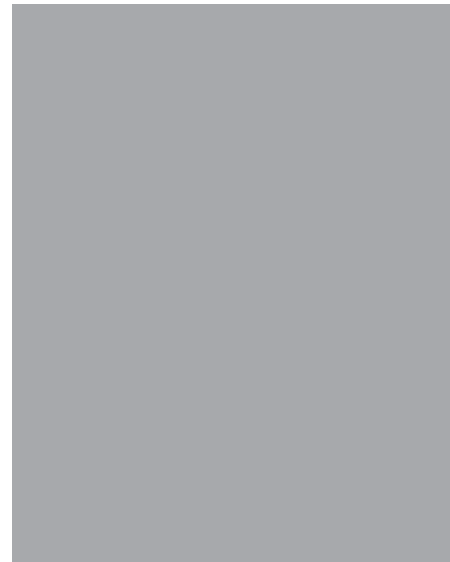
is an associate professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director and undergraduate research assistant before her presentation on youth civic engagement and the “civic empowerment gap” at the Boisi Center.

: 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?

: 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.

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

: 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 incorp' of knowledge.

: How can schools improve the situation?

: 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 are 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 citizen.

: No, it's doing both. One is  
to be quite insistent that merely having

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.

: 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?

: 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.

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