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Can Educational Investment Generate Democratic Returns? A Possible Outlook on How Civic Curriculum Design Influences Economic Mobility and Political Participation

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Abstract. This is a theoretical paper and aims to explore certain views rather than provide a final answer to the issues presented. Therefore, the paper interrogates the conceptual relationship between civic curriculum design, economic mobility, and political participation, starting from a critical perspective on educational investment discourse. The paper does not aim at prescribing an optimal curriculum, rather it examines how different curriculum configurations produce distinct forms of citizenship, economic subjectivity, and democratic practices. These may even be contradictory, but this adds value to the complex educational environment they can produce. The analysis explores the possible tensions between various educational logics and inquires whether the democratic returns might be considered a regulatory concept that disciplines the educational environment. As this research is rather an essay, the bibliography is intended more for orientation purposes than as sources that support the arguments.

Keywords: Civic Curriculum, Educational Investment, Economic Mobility, Political Participation, Citizenship Formation

What Are Educational Returns?

The concept of "returns" in the context of educational investment borrows from the language of financial environments. It is imported into domains that were traditionally revolving around concepts such as civic virtue, democratic equality, and human flourishing. It seems to have sufficient weight and meaning that it became naturalized in contemporary policy discussions, leaving the alternatives in the background, as they seem to be impractical. An analysis of the concept and how it impacts curriculum design, which, in turn, would shape economic mobility and political participation, should be useful to better understand the performances it leads to (Becchetti et al., 2016).

There are several fundamental tensions at the intersection of educational investment, economic advancement, and democratic participation. Economic mobility implies a type of differential positioning within certain hierarchical structures. At the same time, democratic participation can go to great lengths in defending concepts such as equality and collective power. A potential risk for any type of establishment is that a civic curriculum (not necessarily the official version) might prepare students to compete within an existing economic environment, and, at the same time, challenge the economic and political establishment, or at least to the arrangements they were trained to deal with. The challenge would be played out through democratic action. The challenge for the curriculum design concept is not which concept to choose, and what outcomes they have (Zyngier, 2012), but rather whether the outcomes are in compatibility, tension, or even contradiction with one another.

The paper considers the curriculum design not as a technical problem that needs fixing or optimization, but rather as an organizer of educational environment, where similar, even competing, views on citizenship, economy, and democracy are enacted in institutional forms. The purpose of the paper is not to identify superior curriculum models, but to explore distinct

assumptions about what students should become, how societies should function, and what democracy should be, in different curricular designs (Nishiyama, 2021).

The Democratic Returns as the Main Issue

"Democratic returns" is a concept that deserves its due attention and scrutiny (Acheampong & Opoku, 2025). Returns imply some calculable benefits that are the result of initial investments. This concept is borrowed from financial markets and human capital theory. When this concept is applied to democratic life, it raises challenging questions, such as: Can democratic participation be meaningfully quantified as a return? Does framing it as such reposition citizenship as instrumental rather than intrinsic? If education generates returns, who are the investors?

The human capital theory has been dominant in the educational environment, which argues that the individual acquires skills that are considered capital formation. In turn, these generate private returns through enhanced earnings. By extension to the domain of civics, there is a risk of considering democratic participation as another capital, either civic or political. These would have to be accumulated and deployed by individuals. In such a scenario, civic education is validated by its utility, but this would diminish alternative justifications grounded in democratic values and collective goods (Fadhil & Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021).

If the democratic returns scenario is considered, then economic and civic outcomes would be considered to operate in equivalent registers. This means that economic mobility could be measured through income, wealth, and occupational status. There would also be methodological challenges to be considered. On the other hand, political participation is measured through voting, contacting officials, campaign activity, and protest involvement, among others. The question is whether these measurements reveal what truly matters about democratic life. For example, voting frequency might be about habit or social pressure, rather than meaningful engagement. Also, political participation might be more about resource advantages, and less about democratic commitment (McNair, 2008). A civic curriculum would have the daunting task of presenting students with meaningful principles, actions, and opportunities.

The issue is even more problematic: if the civic curriculum enhances both economic mobility and political participation, the question is whether it produces genuine democratic returns or simply and effectively sorts students into differential positions within the existing hierarchies? The bleak scenarios that could emerge are about economic mobility that would mean at least a relative immobility for others in various competitions, and enhanced political participation could reinforce rather than challenge certain structural inequalities, especially if venues and other political engagements remain stratified by class (Briole, 2025).

Could Curriculum Design Be a Contested Terrain?

A curriculum is an amalgamation of competing educational philosophies, political ideologies, and economic logics. These domains collide and create particular worldviews that characterize a certain educational curriculum, and they describe proper social orders. Such a civic curriculum would have to consider content emphasis as expressing divergent conception of citizenship, rather than mere technical choice among competencies that are formed by knowledge, skills, and dispositions. If the curriculum is knowledge-based, it argues for constitutional structures, historical precedents, and institutional mechanics, which implies that effective citizenship only requires a proper understanding of the existing arrangements. There is no need to change, transform, or evolve, since students inherit a system that only requires understanding. Overall, the curriculum promotes respect and care for institutional legitimacy and procedural consistency (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), which can be considered stabilizing values, while others might consider them conservative.

A skills-oriented curriculum emphasizes deliberation, analysis, and advocacy capabilities. When applied to citizenship education, they deliver an active citizenship model, where competencies define effectiveness. An important issue is that skills might remain ambiguous regarding their specific purpose. Depending on what influences students face, deliberative skills could be used either for consensus building or for strategic manipulation. In the same vein, analytical capacities might sway both ways, either towards critical examination of power structures or amassing power for personal gain (Pinet, 2006). Society is permeated by various ideological currents that can be persuasive, and the results could be radically different political subjects that depend on context, values, and purpose.

The disposition-oriented curriculum is, by far, the most problematic, even though it emphasizes efficacy, identity, and democratic commitment. The issue that is at the very core of this curriculum is represented by the "dispositions". As complicated as dispositions may be, they are unavoidable, since students shape themselves through a multiple set of environments, setting themselves up to engage existing systems, or even become frustrated when systemic barriers manage to limit personal or individual agency. However, forming civic identity requires, by necessity, setting boundaries, which do not ensure perfect equality for all. Since human beings are able to hide behind functioning political systems, for personal gain, it seems natural to train students to question the type of democracy, who is running it, and what happens when various democratic commitments are in conflict (Hung, 2013).

The pedagogical approach to the issue embodies contestable assumptions, as well. If the pedagogical approach is based on the teacher transmitting information to the students, where teachers are the knowledge authorities, while students are mere recipients, then the system might be producing citizens prone to be subordinate to political and economic positions. This scenario is not as bleak as it might seem, since foundational knowledge has been delivered to students, who used it to become critical thinkers and engage critically with whichever system they were living in. From this point of view, the pedagogical form and the political formation remain on uncertain grounds that need further inquiry (Biesta, 2008).

The alternative to transmissive pedagogy is participatory pedagogy, which engages students in simulations, deliberations, and community projects. These pedagogies are more in line with democratic principles, but they are not without issues. The programs in which students are enrolled need to address issues such as compulsory attendance, age-segregation, and credentialising hierarchies. The question is whether these types of programs prepare students for real democratic situations or for a substitute system. If done right, such pedagogies develop democratic capabilities, but if done wrong, they will generate controlled consent through controlled experiences, without a genuine "voice" from students.

The economic literacy issue generates new questions that are worth investigating. The curriculum can separate civic and economic domains, in order to preserve democratic life in an autonomous manner, from market logic. It can protect a domain where citizens meet as equals, rather than competitors. Would this be the best approach, especially when economics are so deeply ingrained in the fabric of democratic societies? This scenario would leave students unprepared to recognize or contest economic power that has a political infiltration. At this point, teacher expertise is fundamentally needed, since an integrated curriculum that connects democratic participation with economic advocacy might politicize economic relations in a productive manner. On the other hand, it might reduce democratic life to bitter competition between interest groups. In the same note, it could empower students to pursue collective economic advancement, just as well as it could direct democratic views toward capitalist system maintenance, that requires constant reforming. It seems that the teacher remains a paramount power player in the pedagogical context, capable of fueling either positive or negative results in the student population.

The Instabilities of Concepts and Contingencies

Any educational curriculum takes into consideration its design and outcomes, depending on contextual factors, some of which can lead to destabilizing any general theory. The socioeconomic context is of significant importance for curriculum design, since it not only moderates its effectiveness but also transforms its meaning. There is a difference, even a radical one, in the outcomes regarding institutional values between an affluent suburban school and an under-resourced urban school. The former produces elites by teaching students to leverage institutional privilege, while the latter might lead former students to challenge exclusion. The most stable of all outcomes creates former students who will accept institutional barriers as natural features that require skilled navigation, but not political transformation (Risberg, 2022).

Teacher positionality and interpretation generate further instability because each teacher interprets the curriculum differently, thus creating different educational experiences. Teachers are subjective in their approach to the curriculum and the plethora of educational contents because they are informed by political commitments, cultural backgrounds, pedagogical beliefs. These will be driven through the curriculum into classroom practice. These do not seem to be inherently wrong, but rather an inherent feature of education that cannot be avoided. Any curriculum is a text, and any text requires interpretation. Each teacher will have a different view on the curriculum. The civic curriculum or curricula, since there are differences from one country to another, cannot be standardized, because of the interpretative dimension (Cawdery, 2019). If standardization is achieved, it will be a sign of political imposition, that is not neutral, only one-sided.

A sensitive topic is that of political culture, which shapes the reception and the meaning of a curriculum. Pedagogies that allow for participatory democratic contents carry different perspectives in contexts where democratic participation has been historically achieved. The results are meaningful gains, whereas pseudo-democratic forms that mask exclusions are plagued by social and economic tensions. If students manage to observe the gap between civic education's rhetorical promises and their day-to-day political realities within their communities, they might be inspired to form around a critical consciousness that fuels reforms or they will adhere to cynical disengagement (Boontinand & Petcharamesree, 2018).

Are There Any Alternative Frameworks for Returns?

The first and most important question is whether we should think of democratic education in terms of democratic returns at all. This concept would translate into students who are involved in real democratic experiences, focused on authentic deliberation, collective decision-making, and political action. This concept places students in the school's political life at first, rather than merely preparing them for the community's political life. Another view would place emphasis on contradictions rather than on returns. A successful curriculum could expose tensions between democratic principles and various existing arrangements, extending them to the tensions between equality and hierarchy or participation and marginalization. This curriculum would not aim to smooth these outcomes but rather to emphasize them, through an educational method that fosters critical consciousness regarding systemic tensions. Such issues would challenge students to think "outside the box" and outside their comfort zone, and to devise meaningful solutions to the tensions they will face when engaging their social contexts (Kumashiro, 2000).

A rather problematic approach would emphasize uncertainty and contingency, rather than predictable pathways. Such a curriculum is shaped by complex interactions between curriculum, context, interpretation, and chance. The civics class would become social laboratory, where students experiment with possibilities, versions, outcomes, but not specifically with returns. The focus would inevitably fall on the students, who would have the most responsibility and teachers would have to coordinate and mentor students not through certainty, but through uncertainty and even impossible to apply outcomes (Rotaru, 2021,

pp.87-92). However, students would have a specific set of pedagogical experiences in which failure is safe.

Conclusions and Interrogative Practices

The research, or rather the essay, suggests that relationships between civic curriculum design, economic mobility, and political participation, cannot be reduced to precise calculable returns. The conceptual frameworks that lie at the base of how people think about such relationships have political implications, and these deserve explicit consideration, not necessarily technical, measurable resolutions. The research does not argue in favor of finding or creating an optimal or superior curriculum design, but rather to question the ongoing theoretical work. Perspectives such as how to understand the relationship between democratic education and economic systems that rely on inequality, how can schools simultaneously prepare students to succeed within competitive economic structures, but also how to challenge such structures in a democratic manner, and, how to educate for democracy in various contexts where democracy is only declarative, should be part of debates surrounding the ongoing attempts to form democratic citizens. Even if such perspectives do not have definitive answers, they can foster inquisitive and maturing citizens, who would not take such issues for granted.

Democratic return is a concept that allows for questions about educational investments in political and economic dimensions, adding the risks of constraining educational imagination limited to market logics and various instrumental rationalities. Progress could be achieved by allowing various types of conflicts and tensions to be engaged with and debated thoroughly, even beyond the limits of the curriculum. Education is not a fixed and clearly limited domain, therefore, it would be more lucrative, from a pedagogical perspective to mentor students into thinking and creating scenarios that offer even partial or wrong solutions, that would be further debated. Education is intrinsically complex, and it eludes simple relations, therefore simplistic solutions.

Perhaps the most important question, from an educational perspective, is what kind of society we seek to shape and what kind of relationships among citizens, in what type of economy and democracy? Educational theory most likely cannot offer a definitive answer to all the issues that emerge in society, but it can offer a beacon of light and guide the conceptual stakes and political implications through different approaches. It would create spaces for thoughtful collective deliberation on matters of educational purpose.

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