

# Citizenship for a New Age

By Josh Fullan



When it comes to citizenship in schools, words and actions are failing in equal measure. The language is wrong, the practice is dislocated. With the world in a state of polycrisis, the opportunity cost of not doing something radically better with citizenship education is incalculable. It feels like a moral failure. I would like to offer a way forward for any school leader to tackle this problem head on. And, in the process, redefine learning with citizenship at its core.

First, let us acknowledge that citizenship as it applies to schools and civics education is at best an imperfect word we have accepted for the sake of having some common language. It is far from neutral, particularly in places where citizenship, and its suite of rights and privileges, is denied to some while granted to others as a right of birth or status. When we use the term in schools, citizenship means much more than your status in a country or voting in elections. It refers to something aspirational that is both values- and practice-based. It engages compassion and different perspectives, drives service for public good. But it is a word that can exclude and hurt.

Next, let us consider some of the evidence on the state of what it means to be a global citizen in 2022. Seventy per cent of the global population lives under a dictatorship (Boese et al, 2022). In many democracies, preconditions for democracy, such as trust and civic engagement, are weak and becoming weaker (Fukuyama, 2022; Woo, D., Sargent, R. H., & Goldfarb, D., 2022). The UN's latest Human Development Index shows that the vast majority of countries, including those traditionally held up as models, are moving in the wrong direction on life expectancy, education, income and other living standards (The Economist, 2022).

In the United States, a majority of people say their country is very or extremely divided (Woo, D., Sargent, R. H., & Goldfarb, D., 2022). Nearly a third of Canadians feel the same way about our country, and millions of us believe in conspiracy theories (Anderson, B., & Coletto, D., 2022).

More than a laundry list of bad news, these facts expose the quaking ground beneath the concept of global citizen. Global citizenship in this decade is mostly undemocratic, illiberal, tribal, suspicious and void of shared narratives.

In the context of schools, how do we square these very real values conflicts with the aspirational descriptions of citizenship that we find in strategy and curriculum documents? To be clear, many of these are excellent for the world in which they were written or aspire to, and may continue to be useful for schools that find success with them. But where does that leave those of us who are dissatisfied, or bravely looking to reimagine citizenship more broadly and urgently as the key to our future?



Part of the solution is to take the question of *What is citizenship now?* back to schools so they can do the work of remaking a shared understanding and coherent practice of it. This work must be rigorously context-specific, led by the principal or another school leader with moral imperative, the responsibility of the whole school (Westheimer, 2015), and baked into the curricular program rather than a subsidiary of the social sciences (Barber, 1989).

At Maximum City, since early in the year, we have been leading “Citizenship for a New Age” workshops to help institutions and groups begin a process of reimagining citizenship and developing a framework for its progressive practice, both for the world we want and the one we have. The work is engaging because just about everyone intuitively gets its burning importance. Our humanity is at stake. But schools that want to take on reimagining citizenship more broadly and urgently don’t need external help if they are willing to accept a few non-negotiables:

1. Any new understanding of citizenship must be additive to and different from the existing
2. The new knowledge and understanding must involve students as co-creators
3. The new knowledge and understanding of citizenship must lead to a coherent practice of citizenship as a whole school endeavour
4. The driving question to pin to the wall is: How can our understanding and practice of citizenship benefit the community, its people, built and natural environments?

And here are a few negotiable suggestions to guide the work.

First, the work of understanding and practising citizenship should engage the head, hands and especially the heart. Emotion is the key to good citizenship, to mutualistic listening, to seeing the humanity of others

and even to thinking rationally (Marcus, 2002). Our pandemic-time research at Maximum City with Canadian children and youth also reveals that many of them are feeling an increase in empathy and social responsibility right now (Maximum City, 2021). In other words, the emotions of the young are tuned for positive generational change.

Second, the practice of citizenship needs to be concretely located in places students recognize. It needs to be connected to real people and real places (and thus to real purpose). Accordingly, the real-world problem solving of active citizenship should begin directly outside the school’s door. Rather than a global stage, where the doom and gloom can feel paralyzing and the problems intractable, citizenship should zero in on the school block, the street, the city, the region. Students using an inquiry perspective to explore their built and natural environments combines in vivo experience with specific, proximal goals that can motivate students by providing a greater sense of self-efficacy (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon

in Maddux, 2022). Students should take on the broad responsibility of participating in the community, as well as the specific one of inviting others to join them.

For most young people, civics and citizenship historically has been just another course in the high school syllabus. It barely registers in their consciousness, which in a polycrisis era aches of a very specific and acute moral failure. Reimagining citizenship more broadly and urgently as the key to our future could be a rallying cry for youth since they already recognize climate, social justice and connection as crucial to their lives. The very best learning they can do is about a community’s responsibility to itself and to the planet. It is time to redefine the core of learning to include citizenship as central to all of our futures. [CP](#)

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