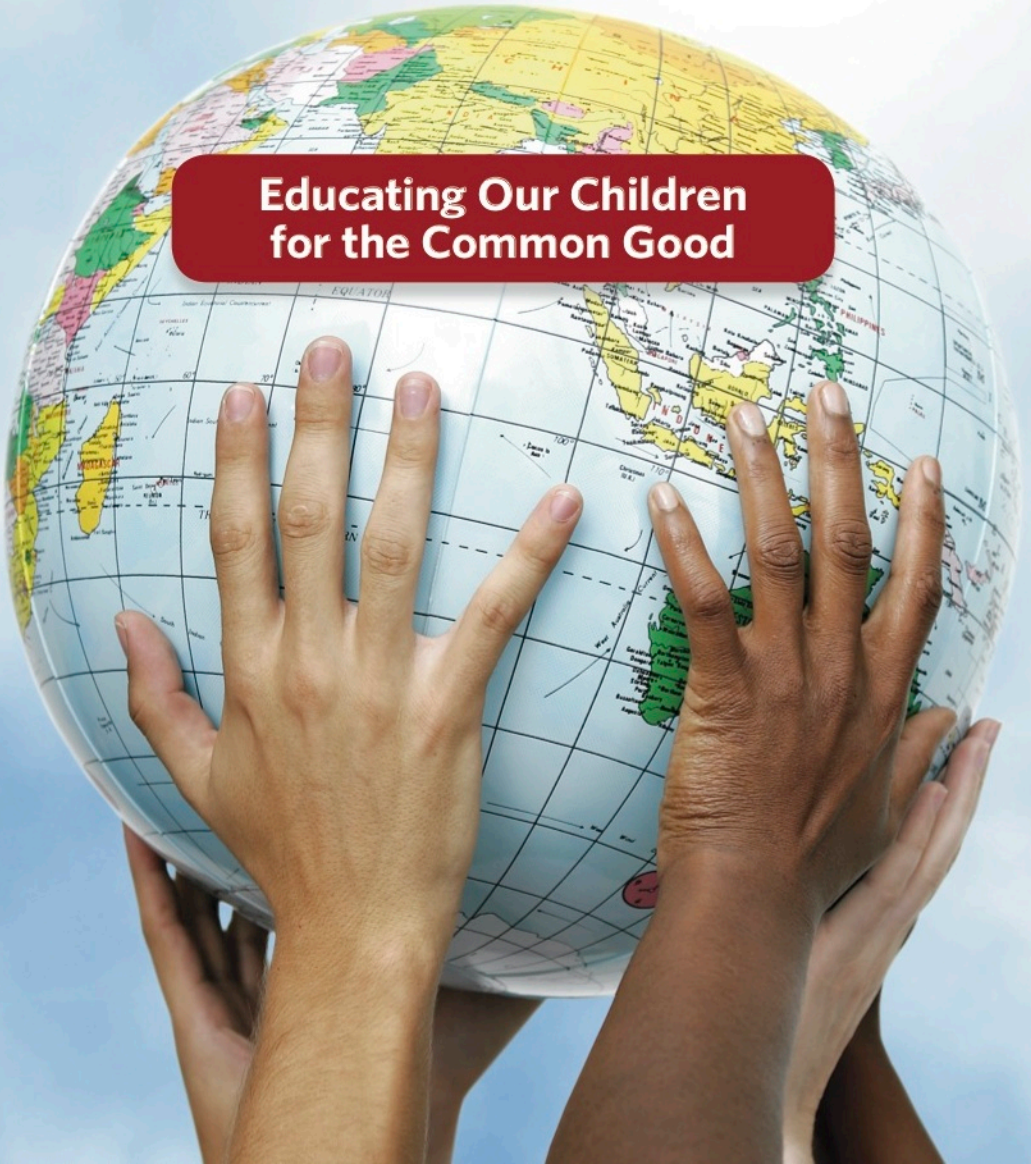


Joel Westheimer

What Kind of Citizen?

**Educating Our Children
for the Common Good**



ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *WHAT KIND OF CITIZEN?*

“Westheimer has written a necessary and brilliant book . . . one of the best in the last decade to take on what it means to reclaim education in the service of democratic values and the common good. Westheimer makes clear that schools are at the heart of civic life and crucial for developing young people who can create a future filled with justice and hope. *What Kind of Citizen?* is a manifesto for an education that matters, a democracy that matters, and for a notion of justice that serves everyone.”

—Henry Giroux, Global Television Network Chair in Communication Studies, McMaster University

“Among the many casualties of a preoccupation with rigor and accountability is the prospect of education for meaningful democratic citizenship. In this refreshingly accessible book, Westheimer not only makes that point but explains the importance of helping students to think critically and question tradition. He issues a welcome invitation to connect our conception of the ideal school to its impact on our broader society.”

—Alfie Kohn, author of *Feel-Bad Education* and *The Myth of the Spoiled Child*

“Providing practicing educators with a goldmine of information and examples, this book indicates, once again, that Westheimer is one of the most prolific, original, and visionary scholars doing citizenship education work and research.”

—James A. Banks, Kerry and Linda Killinger Endowed Chair in Diversity Studies and Director, Center for Multicultural Education, Univ. of Washington

“With *What Kind of Citizen?* Westheimer distinguishes himself as a leading thinker and activist in the radical tradition of W.E.B. DuBois, John Dewey, bell hooks, and Fanny Coppin.”

—William Ayers, School Reform Activist and author of *Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom, Second Edition*

“What does it mean to be a democratic citizen? And what kind of education produces one? For the past two decades, Joel Westheimer has been one of North America’s most knowledgeable and able guides to these critical issues. His book will provide an invaluable roadmap for anyone who asks the big questions.”

—Jonathan Zimmerman, professor of education and history, New York University

“Joel Westheimer argues persuasively that the current emphasis on standardization in the schools not only diminishes teacher professionalism, but conflicts with citizenship education.”

—Diane Ravitch, Professor of Education at New York University, historian of education, author of *Reign of Error*

“This brilliant little book calls for personal and collective responsibility among our students that doesn’t amount to just volunteering on projects, but that attempts to remedy areas of unfairness and injustice.”

—Andy Hargreaves, Thomas More Brennan Chair in Education, Boston College

“In this highly readable, persuasive book, Joel Westheimer reminds us that, in our zeal for higher test scores, we seem to have forgotten the highest aim of education—to produce better people, more thoughtful citizens.”

—Nel Noddings, Lee Jacks Professor of Education Emerita, Stanford University

“Westheimer is practitioner, critic, and visionary. This book is a wake-up call to rethink the real purpose of education. This is a must read for teachers, students, parents and anyone interested in finding deeper meaning for educating our children.”

—Pasi Sahlberg, author of *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?*

“Dr. Westheimer, in this timely and “In this practical, personal, and hopeful work, Joel Westheimer asks us to imagine the kind of people we want to be—and how schools can help us become those people. *What Kind of Citizen?* cracks open the pleasing but often myopic lingo of citizenship education. Readers are left with an alternative vision of schooling that speaks directly to today’s social and environmental crises—and to young people’s hunger for a meaningful life.”

—Bill Bigelow, Curriculum Editor, Rethinking Schools

important book, refocuses the attention of policymakers on providing students with learning experiences that equip them for engaged citizenship and ensuring that teachers have the professional autonomy and trust to do that work.”

—Diane Woloschuk, President, Canadian Teachers’ Federation

What Kind of Citizen?

Educating Our Children
for the Common Good

Joel Westheimer



TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS
TEACHERS COLLEGE | COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Published by Teachers College Press, 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY
10027

Copyright © 2015 by Teachers College, Columbia University

An excerpt from Holly Near's "Great Peace March" (on Singer in the Storm,
1990) is reprinted in Chapter 10 by permission of HollyNear.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy,
or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the
publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available at loc.gov

ISBN 978-0-8077-5635-5 (paper)

ISBN 978-0-8077-7369-7 (ebook)

Printed on acid-free paper

Manufactured in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction	1
1. Changing the Narrative of School	5
The Script in Place	5
What Archeem Taught Me About Teaching	6
2. No Child Left Thinking	11
Teaching Questioning—Essential for Schools in Democracies	12
The Attack on Critical Thinking	13
3. No Teacher Left Teaching	19
Standardization: A Solution in Search of a Problem	20
De-Professionalization and the New Hypocrisy	23
4. How Did This Happen?	27
What Gets Tested Gets Taught	28
The Test Scores That Ate Humanity	30
Reclaiming the Profession: Teacher Professionalism and Democratic Thinking	32
5. What Kind of Citizen?	35
Three Kinds of Citizens	37
An Interlude for Reflection	41
The Many Faces of “Good” Citizenship	41
6. Personally Responsible Citizens	44
Why Personal Responsibility Is Not Enough	44
Are Evaluations Asking the Wrong Questions?	47

7. Participatory and Social Justice–Oriented Citizens	50
Participatory Citizens:	
The Madison County Youth Service League	52
Justice-Oriented Citizens: Bayside Students for Justice	57
The Importance of Recognizing Different Conceptions of Citizenship	63
The Influence of Community Context	66
Pursuing Dual Goals	67
8. Thinking, Engaged Citizens	68
Connecting Learning to Social and Civic Goals	69
Scaling Up: Regional and National Programs	77
Scaling Down: Thinking About a Thinking Curriculum	78
Engaging with the Community	82
9. Seven Myths About Education	84
Myth 1. National Standards Ensure Quality Education	84
Myth 2. Dissent Should Be Medicated	85
Myth 3. The Only Way to Teach Democratic Thinking Is to Make the Entire School Democratic	87
Myth 4. When It Comes to Community-Based Experiences, Knowledge Must Always Precede Action (You Have to Know Stuff Before You Do Stuff)	89
Myth 5. Teachers Who Care About Whether Students Can Think for Themselves Don't Care About Facts or Basic Skills	91
Myth 6. Politics Should Be Kept Out of Schools	92
Myth 7. Community-Based Experiences Must Be Successful	92
10. What Kind of School?	96
Acknowledgments	103
Notes	107
Index	116
About the Author	122

Introduction

The only time I remember my mother speaking directly, and with great sadness, about leaving Germany on a *kindertransport* at the age of 10, was when I was back in Frankfurt with her some 40 years after it happened. I was 19 or 20 years old. We were waiting for a train together in the Frankfurt *Hauptbahnhof* (central station). I saw her look at a platform adjacent to the one where we were standing, and she said, “That’s where I waved goodbye to my mother and grandmother—it looks exactly the same.” And, indeed, it did. From both photographs and history books, I knew that although the allied bombing of Frankfurt destroyed much of the city, the central train station suffered only broken windows and minor damage. Only the advertising looked different. My mother remembers smiling while she waved goodbye so that her mother would not cry. She also remembers giving her favorite doll to the girl seated opposite her who was disconsolate. They were 2 of the 100 girls and boys on the train headed to relative safety in Switzerland. It was the last time my mother would see her family.

Just as I was beginning to write this book, I was asked to write a short intellectual autobiography exploring how my life experiences influenced the scholarly work I chose to pursue. It was a challenging task. Anyone who has attempted to put life experiences onto paper (or screen) knows that it too easily strips those experiences of their vitality and meaning. Yet pen and paper (keyboard and screen) are the tools of my trade. They are imperfect tools, but they are the tools I have. And so I opened the autobiography with my recollections of that moment on the train platform in Frankfurt, not because it was the first experience, chronologically speaking, that shaped my scholarly endeavors, or even the most important one. I started there because, although my parents—both German Jewish refugees—spoke relatively little about their experiences during World War II, I suspect that the intellectual and emotional lineage I inherited was shaped by the profound injustices that informed their childhoods.

This book asks you to imagine the kind of society you would like to live in and shows how schools might best be used to make that vision a reality.

This book asks you to imagine the kind of society you would like to live in and shows how schools might best be used to make that vision a reality. Although the topic is highly political (school reform always is), it

is also deeply personal. It has been said that we don't choose areas of intellectual inquiry, but rather, they choose us. I'm willing to bet my work in education, citizenship, and democratic community is the aboveground product of scholarly concerns with deeper roots. For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in the ways people treat one another, learn from one another, and live together in communities, local, national, and global—in short, how people see themselves as citizens. Education has always provoked my deepest passions, not because of the debates about passing fads and strategies (phonics versus whole language, new math versus old math, small classes versus big classes), but rather because choices about how we teach our children are choices about the kind of society we believe in and the kind of people we hope will emerge from our schoolhouse doors. Will they be concerned only with their own individual success and ambitions without regard to the welfare of others? Will they learn how to develop convictions and stand up for those convictions if and when it becomes necessary to do so?

Since you're reading this, you're probably interested in what schools might teach young people about being a citizen—a member of society—and what that society could look like if schools got it right. When we think about what schools should teach and how they should teach it, we quickly become tangled in the long and complex history of school reform and the contested role of education in democratic societies. In other words, "What kind of citizen?" is neither just an "academic" question (interesting in theory, but of little consequence to real life) nor an abstract one. It's a real question with real consequences for the kind of society we hope to create.

I've worked in many different educational environments in the United States, Canada, and abroad, as a teacher, camp director, youth organizer, and professor of education. Wherever I've been involved, I've become increasingly convinced of the importance of attending to the ways in which the educational program and its staff and participants think about civic communities and the people (or citizens)

that comprise them. What kind of citizens does this institution hope its participants will become? When I ask teachers, students, parents, principals, and even school superintendents to tell me about their ideal school, the places they imagine are always vastly different from the images of schools conveyed by, for example, the standardized-testing industry, or politicians and school reformers focused on international “competitiveness.” Much of the research I will tell you about in this book, placed in its broadest context, focuses on why this discrepancy is the case and what we can do about it. Teaching about citizenship is not solely the purview of social studies or a civics education class. The entire school is party to the enterprise.

What does an ideal school look like in your mind? What lessons are being conveyed? How are children and teachers interacting? What kinds of responsibilities are students being asked to take on? What vision of the “good” society is this school asking students to imagine? Are they learning to think about the kind of society *they* want to live in? Are they learning the skills and habits they would need to help bring that society into being? Are they learning to recognize injustice and work with others in their communities to diminish it? These are the questions that are considered in the chapters that follow.

I prefer to think about schools, not as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge (though they are that too), but as places where children learn about the society in which they are growing up, how they might engage in productive ways, and how they can fight for change when change is warranted.

Schools have always taught lessons in citizenship, moral values, good behavior, and “character.” Even before there was formal schooling, informal education was replete with these kinds of goals. Contemporary schools inevitably teach these lessons as well. For example, schools teach children to follow rules, and to be sure, sometimes following the rules is necessary. But does being a “good” citizen ever require questioning those rules? What is the proper balance between rule following and thinking about the origins and purpose of those rules? We can imagine classrooms that aspire to that balance. But just because schools teach children about citizenship and character, doesn’t mean they always do it well or even toward admirable aims. In fact, schools and other youth organizations have been enlisted in some of the worst forms of citizenship indoctrination as well. Counted among the many examples of organized “citizenship” education are

the hateful lessons learned by members of the Hitler Youth brigades who were the same age as my mother when she boarded the train to Switzerland.

My goal in writing this book is not to convince you that schools should teach citizenship—because that is a given. I write this book because, knowing that schools are always instruments of citizenship education, it seems vitally important that educators, policymakers, and parents—anyone who cares about education and society—ask not whether schools should teach citizenship but rather *what kind* of citizen our educational programs imagine.

I hope that after reading this book you—like me—are left with the sense that schools, beyond teaching children how to read and write, do math problems, and understand science and history, also serve as an inevitable influence on young people's view of the world and, therefore, are a potentially powerful tool that can shape our society for the better.

Changing the Narrative of School

Before becoming a professor of education, I taught 6th, 7th, and 8th grades in the New York City public schools. Like many idealistic new teachers, I entered the profession committed to nothing less than instilling in young people the confidence, knowledge, and skills required to change the world. I wanted my students to treat one another with respect, to challenge injustice when they saw it, and to learn that they were powerful, that they could make a difference, and in the process find deep meaning in their social and professional lives.

Archeem,¹ an African American student in my 7th-grade social studies class, thought otherwise. For my first 6 months in the classroom, Archeem and I were at loggerheads. He was not good at what Denise Pope-Clark calls “doing school.”² He was a C– student. And I was not yet a skilled teacher. I assumed that by offering Archeem something beyond the superficiality of rote memorization and regurgitation, he would work hard, learn more, and enjoy school. Archeem and many of his classmates, on the other hand, figured that I was a newbie who should be challenged.

THE SCRIPT IN PLACE

My first mistake? I figured that as a teacher, I got to dream up the background material for a script that would then unfold within the humane and educative conditions I had put in motion. New teachers often believe they get to write the script, set the stage, and raise the curtain.

New teachers often believe they get to write the script, set the stage, and raise the curtain. But students know something that only later becomes evident to the adult in the room: The play has already started.

But students know something that only later becomes evident to the adult in the room: The play has already started. I was entering in Act

III. In Acts I and II, the plot was established, the parts cast, the good guys and bad guys already chosen, the narrative arc long since determined. There were “smart” students and “dumb” ones. There were class clowns and teacher’s pets. Kids know how school works long before they enter their first classroom. They see television cartoons about school; they see movies about school; they’ve heard other children talk about school; they have older siblings who’ve gone to school. Our culture has already dictated that school entails a timeless, existential battle between the tasks and rules adults impose on the one hand, and students’ efforts to preserve their own souls without getting thrown out, on the other hand. They wouldn’t describe it that way, but that’s the gist of it.

Let me give an example about the difficult-to-break narratives already in place before a teacher even sets foot in the school building. Ask any group of children what happens when a substitute teacher comes to the classroom. What do they say? Mayhem—children move the desks around, change their names, and inform the substitute teacher that their “real” teacher allows them to wander around the room whenever they want and to eat their lunch at 9:15 a.m. In short, they make the life of the substitute a temporary hell. Substitute teachers are clueless and have no idea how to teach, goes the script. Socrates himself could arrive in a 5th-grade classroom for a day. It wouldn’t matter. The play is already in motion.

Narratives, however, *can* be rewritten. It takes time, patience, and creativity. Back in my 1st year of teaching, I guessed (having read his school file) that in Archeem’s internalized narrative, school was mostly about humiliation. It was the teacher’s job to catch him out on not knowing things, and Archeem’s job to try to avoid those encounters. I imagined that he recognized the usefulness of acquiring some of the skills and knowledge being taught in school, but that in a larger sense, the connection between what went on in school and his life outside of school was tenuous at best. In those first few months of teaching, neither Archeem nor I knew this yet, but we were both going to find our way outside the dominant narrative of school.

WHAT ARCHEEM TAUGHT ME ABOUT TEACHING

After a week of classes in which we had discussed the civil rights movement, racism, and prejudice in America, all of my students

were duly outraged at the injustices perpetrated against Black people throughout history. Students couldn't believe the folly of thinking that someone's intelligence, skills, or rights could be judged by the color of their skin. They sat riveted by excerpts from *Eyes on the Prize* and speeches by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. I quickly became aware that although the students were quick to criticize a kind of racism that was already widely reviled in the United States and elsewhere, they failed to carry that critique or moral commitment to any other sphere. I witnessed African American students calling Hispanic students "spic." I saw Archeem and his friend Brian yell "faggot" at a student who didn't share their athletic prowess in dodge ball. When I asked students if they thought people were still prejudged for superficial reasons, they didn't know. I knew something was not working, and I had an idea.

Two weeks earlier, various cities had been observing Gay Pride Week. It was highly controversial, even in New York, and certainly in New York City public schools (this was in the mid-1980s). Despite the explosive nature of the debate, our school principal had agreed to allow an "out" gay teacher to use the second-floor glass display case for posters and newspaper articles about gay pride. But 4 days after the teacher had spent a great deal of his own time on the display, someone or some group of students had smashed in the glass with a chair. The teacher and the principal decided to leave it that way for the time being.

I had a conversation with José, the school janitor. I asked if he would help me by arriving at the beginning of my next social studies class with a ladder and insist that he had to fix a ceiling light which inexplicably would require a power drill and his other noisiest possible tools. He agreed, and as soon as class had started and he began to work, there was no hearing what anyone was saying. I asked students to grab their chairs and to carry them downstairs to the large second-floor hallway where we set up in a circle around the display case with the smashed glass to continue our discussion about racism in America.

I continued to lead the discussion, waiting for what I was not sure would happen. But something happened, and it happened because of Archeem. He had been leaning back in his chair looking characteristically disinterested in the conversation when he suddenly rocked forward and raised his hand. I nodded to Archeem, not sure what would happen next.

"It's like that," Archeem said, pointing to the broken glass. All the students in the circle swung their heads straight to the center of the broken glass.

"Like what?" I asked, hoping I was masking my nervous anticipation of his response.

"Racism is like when you hate someone just because of something about them that you don't even know nothing about."³ Silence followed. Here was this 13-year-old African American boy somehow, indirectly, standing up for gay people, and perhaps more importantly identifying a contemporary example of prejudice and connecting it to a widely agreed moral standard that called prejudice wrong.

The other students nodded, and a discussion ensued about the connection between different kinds of prejudice. A number of students relied on Archeem's contribution. Latosha started, and I recall her having been on both the giving and receiving end of more than her share of disrespectful taunts:

"What Archeem said made me realize all the different ways human beings diss each other."

"Do you think the way southern White people felt about Black people was like how some of us think about gay people?"

"No, it's not the same—being gay isn't natural."

"Isn't that what they said about Blacks being free?"

"No, it's not the same because gay people are disgusting!"

[laughter].

We hadn't reached a progressive teacher's nirvana by any means, but the conversation had started. For the rest of that week and the next, students researched civil-rights-era documents from the 1950s and 1960s. They read historical opinions about whether Blacks should have the same social and political rights as Whites, and they compared those opinions to contemporary positions (in newspaper articles and legislation) about gay rights. In classes that followed, students continued to refer back to the conversation Archeem had sparked. Two of them wrote a note to the teacher who had created the gay pride display apologizing on behalf of "whomever was too chicken to apologize for themselves."

It became evident to both me and my students that teaching about slavery (racism is bad) or teaching about World War II (Hitler was evil) was too easy. The historical lessons were fine. But the more important

message didn't stick: History doesn't stand still, and we can never be complacent about the rights and responsibilities of citizens. If schools are to be instrumental in helping young people engage with the world around them and work to improve it, then the lessons in school have to teach more than a calcified version of past events. Schools need to offer lessons that encourage new interpretations and that lend themselves to contemporary problems. It is relatively common for good teachers to demonstrate to students the potential tyranny of opinion over facts in landmark historical controversies (e.g., the idea that people whose skin is black are not as intelligent or deserving of rights as those whose skin is white). Less clear, however, is whether such lessons give students the skills they need to critically analyze contemporary problems and injustices—the kinds of skills they need in order to be engaged democratic citizens.

We can never be complacent about the rights and responsibilities of citizens. If schools are to be instrumental in helping young people engage with the world around them and work to improve it, then the lessons in school have to teach more than a calcified version of past events.

Beyond learning history, students need to examine issues that challenge their own assumptions and perspectives. Indeed, that there are not, as of yet, clear “answers” (widespread cultural agreement) on the specific questions makes those issues useful. Back then, having students examine whether gay men should be allowed to serve in the U.S. military, for example, became a more useful issue for discussion and critique than whether African American men should be allowed to serve. The former (at least until this decade) forced difficult analysis and consideration of a variety of viewpoints, while the latter, piggy-backing on already-established widespread agreement, failed to do so.

I received two complaints from parents who said they did not want their children discussing gay rights in school. I was willing to weather those complaints, and luckily my principal was similarly undeterred. I had stumbled on one possible, albeit idiosyncratic, way to teach critical thinking. But that was not the only lesson I drew from this experience. From that day on, not exclusively, but regularly, Archeem's attitude toward both school and me changed. There were no miracles, but Archeem seemed to have grown a little bit taller. He began to raise his hand. He participated in discussions. I told other teachers about what Archeem had said and they asked him about it too. When a school assembly included a neighborhood community organizer talking about

public housing, Archeem asked me how you get a job like that, working with people in the neighborhood. It seemed in some small way, I no longer fit the role of the teacher trying to catch him not knowing things. As you can tell from my recollections, Archeem became more than a thorn in my novice teacher's side. Together we had changed the narrative.

My experience with Archeem and his classmates taught me something about the complexity of teaching critical thinking when it comes to matters of contemporary concern. But what did this say about the role of schools in democratic societies? What did it say about citizenship?