



## Teachers' experiences and teaching civic engagement beyond self-regarding individualism



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- *Self-regarding individualism* is a context in which teachers teach civic engagement.
- *Self-regarding individualism* promotes individuals' self-interests.
- This individualism limits students' preparation for civic engagement.
- Experiences help teachers implement civic education programs.
- Experiences represent the teachers' effort in moving beyond this individualism.

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### ABSTRACT

Worldwide, a political, economic and cultural context stressing self-interest, which I describe as self-regarding individualism, restricts the commitment of governments, schools and people to the common good in civic life. In such a context, this study uses a narrative inquiry methodology to explore through the narrative texts of two social studies teachers from the United States the way their experiences help them teach civic engagement beyond *self-regarding individualism*. These experiences are a valuable teaching resource because they represent the teachers' enduring effort to move beyond this type of individualism.

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### 1. Introduction

Worldwide, political, cultural and economic reforms primarily promoting self-interest are diminishing the spaces for civic engagement and community ties (Ham, 2000; Lerchner, 2002). This brings to the forefront the need to strengthen the schools' and teachers' mission to prepare their students civically (Gimeno Sacristan, 2002). In the United States, this stress on self-interest can be found in a context of *self-regarding individualism* that partly characterizes the cultural, political and economic life of the country. In education, this context influences many civic programs that tend to foster students' individual interests rather than engage them with the common good (Parker, 2003; Serow, 1991). In such a context, teachers have the crucial challenge of improving their students' civic preparation, and in this respect, their experiences

constitute a resource of utmost importance (Pace, 2008; Torney-Purta & Richardson, 2002). Using the narrative texts of two social studies teachers from the US, this study explores how their experiences help them teach civic engagement beyond *self-regarding individualism*.

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), through narrative inquiry, researchers compose texts that collect and retell stories of people who, by sharing them, relive their experiences envisioning new ways to improve them. In education, these stories are important given that teachers' experiences are intrinsically intertwined with their professional knowledge, forming the practical knowledge that guides their teaching and allows them to accommodate their students' cultural differences, choose appropriate teaching methods and content and give purpose to their teaching (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Craig, 2007; Elbaz, 1983; Xu & Connelly, 2010). Consequently, teachers' stories give insights into their practical knowledge and invite teachers to relive their teaching experiences to explore new possibilities of improving their students' lives while

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meeting the demands that derive from institutional guidelines and the schools' prescribed curriculum (Britzman, 2003; Goodson, 1992).

In relation to civic education, amidst limitations that arise from current educational policies that downplay its importance in schools (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Shaker & Heilman, 2008), Dilworth (2004) claims that teachers can use "their personal knowledge and experience to help students understand the social and political complexities of diversity and democracy" (p. 181). Nevertheless, few studies in the field consider these teachers' experiences while preparing students civically (Root & Billig, 2008). Furthermore, while some qualitative studies on teachers implementing civic learning programs do recognize their importance, they reveal neither the actual experiences these teachers had nor their role in encouraging their students to become better citizens (Nygreen, 2008; Root & Billig, 2008; Wade, 2007). Specifically, in the field of narrative studies, Diaz's (2005) work on teachers' experiences with the 9/11 terrorist attack and how they shaped their conversations with students around the complexities of democracy may be considered an exception. Thus, through the use of narrative inquiry, this study expands the understanding of how teachers use their experiences to teach civic engagement.

In addition, narrative inquiry helps to locate teachers' stories within broader social contexts (Goodson, 1997, 2003). As Goodson (2003) claims, it would be "unfortunate if, in studying teachers' stories, we ignored these contextual parameters, which so substantially impinge upon and constantly restrict the teacher's life" (p. 44). Accordingly, providing a context in which to read teachers' stories allows the recognition of the limits teachers face during their professional experiences as well as the potential for change in their practices (Kelchtermans, 1993; Willinsky, 1989). In this sense, the intent of this study is not to impose context over experience but to explore the experiences through which teachers interact with larger political and educational structures to improve the civic lives of their students (Goodson, 1994). To provide a context to the teachers' narratives of this study, I use the expression *self-regarding individualism*.

## 2. Self-regarding individualism<sup>1</sup> as a civic and teaching context

Macpherson (1977) claims that a context of individualism centered mainly on self-interest tends to produce low levels of public interest. Mansbridge (1983) identifies self-interest as *self-regarding interest* when it refers solely to one's own self-interest or needs. Because the notions of self-interest and individualism are correlated within analyses of liberal democracies (Dewiel, 2000; Levine, 1981), I use the expression of *self-regarding individualism* to describe a political, cultural and economic context that stresses self (regarding) interests, curtailing the government's and people's commitment to the collective common good (Gould, 1990; Young, 2000). It also restricts the schools' role in preparing students civically (Apple, 1995). Mansbridge (1983) also distinguishes *other-regarding interests* related to other people's concerns or wellbeing

(which can include one's own) and advocates for moving beyond self-interest in public life through social cooperation that integrates other-regarding interests without necessarily excluding legitimate self-interests. Accordingly, I use the expression of teaching beyond *self-regarding individualism* to suggest a form of teaching that encourages students to advance the common good by supporting the needs of others along with their own interests through their civic engagement.

### 2.1. Self-regarding individualism, governments and civic participation

In this study, I identify *self-regarding individualism* as a cultural, political and economic context that stresses the supremacy of free individuals moved by their self (*regarding*) interests rather than public concerns (Brown, 1993; Levine, 1981; Macpherson, 1962). Historically, in the United States, this context of individualism has stressed the importance of private property and market relations (Macpherson, 1977). The concentration of private property in the hands of a privileged (predominantly) white class has resulted in the stratification of society across race and class lines and in the emergence of social groups defending their own interests (Foner, 1998; Mills, 1997). In this sense, individual groups, even with strong internal community ties, such as conservative or minority groups, develop a *group-based form of self-regarding individualism* by exclusively advancing their self-interests and not engaging with other groups to pursue *other-regarding interests* and build a common good (Bobbio, 1987; Dewiel, 2000).

Following Mansbridge (1983, 1990), I connect this context of *self-regarding individualism* with a model of democracy, predominant in the United States, that secures people's self (*regarding*) interests in both the economic and political spheres. From an economic standpoint, this individualistic context drives people to satisfy their needs primarily through market exchange and economic freedom (Friedman, 2002; Hayek, 1960). At a political level, particular groups and individual citizens compete to influence governments to represent and advance their interests, resembling a marketplace in which commercial firms compete to attract consumers and increase their economic profit (Becker, 1976; Gilman, 2003; Harvey, 2005; Schumpeter, 1976). However, in such a model, governments play a limited role in fostering social cooperation to pursue common interests and the collective common good (Gould, 1990; Young, 2000).

This context of *self-regarding individualism* partly explains the tendency of certain groups in the US to use active civic engagement to pursue their self-interests rather than the common good (Levine, 2000; Rauch, 1994). However, due to the emphasis on economic relationships that lead to a decrease in community ties and a commitment to private/individual interests, this context seems to have a stronger influence on the decrease of civic engagement (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1996; Putnam, 2000). According to the National Conference on Citizenship (2006), "people are less well informed about public affairs; and our trust of and connection to key institutions have been largely on the decline" (p. 5). Participation in voluntary associations and community projects has decreased, especially among the white population (The National Conference on Citizenship, 2008). Among other factors, *self-regarding individualism* explains the preference among the population for taking care of their own interests while political institutions take care of the public affairs (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001; Macedo, 2005). This individualistic context may also explain the resistance in certain groups of the population to deliberating about political issues due to a lack of interest in engaging with opinions that are different from theirs (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Mutz, 2006).

<sup>1</sup> Individualism refers to a wide range of practices in American society (Bellah et al., 1996; Lukes, 1973). Because some authors argue that depending on the type of individualism it can strengthen or weaken people's civic engagement (Held, 2006; Macpherson, 1977), I saw the need to consider this distinction. However, this distinction does not provide a unified and exhaustive theoretical framework that can help to depict a particular individualistic context restrictive of civic engagement in society and schools. For this reason, I borrow from Mansbridge (1980), who discusses the influence of self (regarding) interests in political contexts, to build the expression of *self-regarding individualism*. To describe this context, I do not follow this author's framework extensively but rather bring together different discussions about the limiting effects that a cultural, political and economic stress on self-interest has on civic engagement.

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