

Civic Education: What Schools Can Do to Encourage Civic Identity and Action

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The timeliness of civic education for American youth is discussed. Particular attention is given to the history of calls for civic education, the state of civic education in schools today, particularly those serving youth in disadvantaged contexts, and the specific ways in which schools can better address the civic education needs of contemporary youth. Findings from research are synthesized around three strategic moves: 1) Promote public discussion and debate of critical issues; 2) Provide quality extracurricular and student government activities; and 3) Build on particular types of service that have proven to enhance civic participation in and identity with one's community. It is concluded that these activities can provide factual knowledge of history and government and encourage students to partake in active practices of the daily life of being citizens.

At various times in any nation's history the need arises for civic renewal. In such moments, advanced Western states often turn to schools and the reform of civic education. Some of the precipitating conditions include political uncertainty, widening disparities in wealth, the influx of immigrants, and rural versus urban tensions. These conditions, which prevailed in the early 20th century, have come to the fore again. The end of the Cold War in 1990 suddenly upset a four-decade equilibrium structured by the threat of mutual nuclear destruction. Since then, the world has witnessed several financial crises, the rise of new economic powers in Asia, and large-scale immigration from the South and East to the North and West. It is not happenstance, then, that initiatives to strengthen civic education have been instituted in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and England (e.g., Kerr & Cleaver, 2009; Milner, 2009).

The United States was slower in coming to the same awareness shown by other countries. With the dawn of the new century, there has been an awakening to the need for civic renewal (e.g., Putnam, 2000) and modernization of civic education (e.g., Carnegie Corporation of New York and Center for Information Research on Civic Learning and Education, 2003). Schools are not

the only source of renewal, but they are essential because they cultivate the next generation of citizens and civic leaders on whom sustaining democracy depends. As Miller (2010) astutely points out, an older generation about to pass off the scene can ignore addressing issues of climate change, social security, and stalemate among elected officials. But, today's children and youth must live with the consequences because their lives will be shaped by whether or how these matters are resolved.

The aim of this article is to suggest concrete ways that our schools can fulfill their civic education function. This focus is hardly novel. In fact, multiple commissions were established a century ago for the same purpose when similar precipitating conditions prevailed, for instance, financial crises and large-scale immigration (Schachter, 1998). Nor does this essay introduce new justifications beyond those other scholars have advanced (e.g., Levine, 2007; Newmann, 1987). It does, however, add to the prior work with a synthesis of research findings that devolve into strategies for classroom and school restructuring. This effort is important for all schools but especially for those schools which educate the disadvantaged segment of our youth population, which has lagged on measures of engagement for several decades. The overarching theme of this essay is that we know quite a bit about how to make classrooms training grounds for citizenship and instilling civic identities, so

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the present moment is opportune for moving forward with resolve.

SCHOOLING MATTERS

Recent reviews of research have established that more years of schooling are associated with greater citizen participation and have identified some of the educational conditions that account for the differences. Flanagan, Levine, and Settersten (2009) looked at several measures of youth's civic engagement, including voting, volunteering, and membership in voluntary organizations. They divided the youth population into two groups, one headed toward college, in college, or graduated from college, and the other not headed for or ever having attended college. The former group was more civically engaged than the latter group was on distinct measures. These researchers, further, went back to 1970 data to check whether this group difference had newly emerged and found that the difference due to schooling existed previously and has been maintained in recent years.

Because more and a wider socio-economic status segment of youth have attended college in recent years, maintenance of differences in engagement is noteworthy. This leads to the question of why schooling makes such a difference. There is no definitive answer, but another review of research by Zaff, Youniss, and Gibson (2009) and studies of civic education in schools (e.g., Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; McFarland & Starmanns, 2009) specified some of the factors worth pursuing. For example, some schools in which the majority of students are headed for college are likely to be located in areas that have lively political debate; offer civics classes which encourage discussion of political issues; support student governments which have a voice in school policies, say, disciplinary procedures; and supply adjuncts to classroom instruction such as clubs, interest organizations, and service learning.

Schools cannot select the political districts in which they are located, but they can choose how to structure the teaching of civics and the degree of emphasis they will give to cultivating citizenship. The current national climate for civic education poses a possible dilemma. Educators are being pressured to emphasize tested achievement in reading and math. Schools are judged by those scores and teachers' contracts and rewards may be determined by test results. At the same time, the so-called "long civic generation" (Putnam, 2000), which sustained our democracy so ably through and after WWII, is rapidly leaving the scene and the subsequent baby boom generation is reaching old age. Ready or not, a replacement is coming and it consists

of today's students who are ever more immigrant, culturally diverse, and ethnically mixed. Their competence in reading and math is essential, but so is their preparation for active citizenship in American democracy.

This context may be viewed in various ways. In the present essay, it is taken as a challenge and an opportunity. In the remainder of this essay, focus will be placed on ways educators and schools can build on existing research to enliven and strengthen the civic curriculum to promote knowledge, interest, and habits of active citizenship. There is, of course, no one model of the good citizen (e.g., Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). For some observers, the good citizen votes, obeys laws, and contributes to the welfare of others. For others, citizenship entails an active engagement in democracy—knowing how to join others in influencing policy and bettering the community. For still others, participation is spurred and guided by a quest for justice. These versions vary from emphasizing representative democracy to recognizing the importance of civil society where engaged citizens interact with government and with one another on grounds of principle (Sirianni, 2009). Because of the complex conditions that confront us at the start of the 21st century, the more active, principle-driven model is the assumed educational goal throughout this essay because it holds the greatest promise for the future.

Classroom Discussion

One of the final recommendations of the 1908 report on civic education by a special commission of the American Political Science Association supported "Debates and discussions upon the issues of the day..." (Committee of Five, 1908, p. 257). This recommendation was couched in a logic that civics classes were to be designed, not to produce political scientists or historians, but for "...preparing the young for taking their place in the community and leading useful lives" (p. 233). This entailed having students observe and partake in local government so that they would come to understand how government functions in their lives and how they can be awakened to government and their role in it. This rationale gave rise to having students focus, not on texts, but on local government functions, such as courts, the police, and waste collection, which stimulate students' interest more than would "...being taken back to the history of the colonies in 1760..." (p. 238). It was in this context that a high school teacher from Rome, Georgia, claimed, "Once a week (or 10 days) spirited debates are prepared on subjects of value to an ordinary citizen, e.g., compulsory education, educational qualifications for electoral franchises, etc." (p. 243).

The 1908 logic of teaching civics, which gave rise to the importance of classroom discussion, did not require support from scientific research. The ability to talk

intelligently and civilly about important issues of the day was an assumed part of being a citizen. Politics was not a thing apart from daily life, but was brought into it via public speech. This same logic applies to classrooms today with the additional fact that research supports it. Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, and Schulz (2001), in a study of 14-year olds in 28 countries, reported that in-class discussion of political issues was a strong predictor of civic knowledge. This result is supported by findings from 10 Chicago city high schools (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). These findings coincide with observations that discussion of issues with parents also predicts levels of civic knowledge in young people (e.g., McIntosh, Youniss, & Hart, 2007). To close the circle further, Gimpel et al. (2003) found that as political competition went up in an electoral district, public discussion increased and so did the civic knowledge of students. In sum, when political matters recur in everyday discourse, they become part of life instead of being foreign elements belonging to the domain of experts.

Why is public discussion so efficacious? Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini (2009) suggest that public speech sets a dynamic in motion such that speakers have to listen to one another and begin to share perspectives. In private thought, one can construct ideas and test them out with imaginary self-reflective feedback. Public speech, however, opens the person to challenges that are unanticipated and that would otherwise not be available. Once a challenge is put in play, one's credibility and prestige demand a coherent response. Experimental evidence to the point has come from studies by Kuhn (e.g., Kuhn & Udell, 2003) that spell out processes by which the exchange of ideas in open peer dialogue leads to the strengthening of arguments and sharing of perspectives. Again, it is one thing to imagine what another person is thinking, but quite another matter to hear ideas expressed in conjunction with and opposition to one's own thoughts. As Luker (1984) has pointed out, the sharing of perspectives is all the more important when deeply held emotional issues are at stake. She shows that with matters such as abortion, it is easy to take a side and shield off alternatives by attributing possible motives and rationales to others that may or may not accurately depict their position. Once ideas are exchanged publicly, the mode of argument changes and opportunities for new understanding increase markedly.

Observers of actual classrooms have noted that contemporary students (and perhaps teachers) tend not to appreciate the value of differences and the normalcy of conflict within our democracy (e.g., Gimpel et al., 2003). Conflict of values and interests is a given that is built into our form of democracy. It is expected that individuals and groups have different interests with each wanting to see its side win out in terms of policy or law.

Our system of government is designed to foster debate and to generate compromise, not to find the most moral or efficient proposal. One can see the template for serious debate within the making of our very Constitution as, for example, when James Madison, Patrick Henry, and George Mason debated one another vociferously and heatedly before the Virginia legislature (Labunski, 2006). There is a popular notion that conflict on political issues ought not to be aired publicly among strangers and this has led to the privatizing of beliefs and the withholding of their expression (Eliasoph, 1998). But, it is not uncivil to argue civilly. Rather it is normal and without it public ideas would be left to the devices of masters of public relations.

In this context, studies of classroom discussion and how it helps to train students in the rudiments of democratic discourse are especially important. Studies such as one by Hess (2009) serve as a model because they are grounded in a firm understanding of democratic debate, have confidence in students' abilities to confront differences, and provide teachers with methods which allow them to be non-partisan provocateurs. On one level, classroom debate is a form of role-playing which, at the same time, can be instructive about such things as turn taking, rebutting, revising, and persuading. On another level, however, debates can be about issues in which students have a real stake such as school policy regarding discipline, school budgets, support of extra-curricular activities, and the like. Hess lists the real barriers and limits on what teachers in some of today's classrooms can risk by stimulating debate. They should be seen as challenges and not reason for reverting to recitation of textual material or focusing on answers to multiple-choice tests. If the goal is to cultivate informed citizens who know their interests and can express them in the public forum, with all that it implies, then teaching and encouraging public discussion ought to be a central part of the civics classroom.

Student Government, Clubs, and Youth Organizations

Consideration of student government and organizational forms of extracurricular activities might start with two longitudinal findings. Hanks and Eckland (1978) reported on high school sophomores from 42 schools in 1955, 4,125 who were surveyed again in 1970. Three measures of civic involvement were obtained in the later survey: Voting in the most recent election, current membership in a voluntary association, and degree of political alienation (e.g., "I think most public officials care a great deal about what people like me think."). These measures, which were obtained when the sample was around age 30, were assessed in terms of a number of predictors obtained in 1955 when the same people were

about age 15. It was reported that the strongest predictor of adult membership in voluntary groups was participation in high school extracurricular activities, which included participation in school government. This predictor was stronger than high school grade point average and father's or mother's educational attainment. In turn, adult membership in voluntary associations was the strongest positive predictor of voting and low degrees of political alienation.

In conjunction with the aforementioned prospective study, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) reported on 2,517 adults in a retrospective analysis which assessed factors predicting political engagement defined by active membership in voluntary associations, voting, protesting, contributing to campaigns, and the like. The predictors of current engagement included items from the respondents' past as well as current lives. After a series of regression analyses and a vast array of findings, Verba et al. concluded: "The variables most closely related to [adult] participation are those that measure the activity of the respondent as a high school student—in particular, involvement in high school government, but also involvement in other clubs and activities,—though not activity in high school sports" (p. 425). This conclusion dovetails with Hanks and Eckland's (1978) chief finding in showing a relationship between civic involvement during high school and civic as well as political engagement several years later in adulthood.

Much has been written about the value of membership in voluntary organizations that have served as training grounds for democratic citizenship. For example, Rosenblum (1998) and Skocpol (2003) have proposed that membership provides individuals with habits such as expressing oneself publicly, dealing with periodic leadership change, persuading others, opposing, then having to compromise, and the like. These arguments have been made in light of America's long rich history of voluntary membership organizations. The two aforementioned studies add to this argument by demonstrating a longitudinal linkage between experiencing democratic practices during adolescence and carrying their effects forward well into adulthood. Related evidence helps to make the case even stronger. For example, Ladewig and Thomas (1987) report that youth who were active participants in 4-H programs became adults who were 3 to 5 times more likely to become members and leaders of voluntary organizations later in their adulthoods.

In a unique study, McFarland and Starmanns (2009) sampled American high schools to determine the kinds of student governments they sponsored. They found a broad distribution of types on dimensions of student empowerment, administrative supervision, and the like. They also found that differences in types were correlated with socio-economic standing. Schools serving

disadvantaged students were less likely than schools servicing their counterparts, to have student governments. And, if the former schools had student governments, they were less likely to have a voice in policy. This finding is germane to a broader result regarding the structure of high schools serving disadvantaged and minority youth. When students in such schools are given the opportunity and resources, they spontaneously identify the need to have a voice in the making of policy on such matters as discipline, harassment, and mandated tests (e.g., Larson & Hansen, 2005). These and other results may help to explain the low levels of later civic engagement in the non-college young adult population (cf. Flanagan et al., 2009; Zaff et al., 2009). The high schools that many of these young people attended did not provide elemental experiences with democratic practices through having a hand in policies dear to students' interests. This conclusion resonates with Kahne and Middaugh's (2009) findings that schools serving disadvantaged youth tend to offer civic education classes that are lacking in enriching democratic practices such as discussions, simulations, service learning, and other effective strategies.

Service and Service Learning

Service has become something a phenomenon in the nation's schools. During the 1980s, institutions of higher education encouraged service, and what started in a few elite universities grew into a movement that today has reached over 1,000 campuses (Campus Compact, 2010, "Who We Are"). Soon after higher education made this move, high schools picked it up so that today, 65 percent of high school seniors claim to have done some type of service during the previous 12 months (Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley, 2010). As one might imagine, the large number of schools and students involved in this enterprise gives rise to variation in the kinds of service that students do, how they go about it, how it is organized, what its rationale might be, and the kinds of effects it has on intended recipients, the students, and the communities where service occurs.

Although many civics classrooms utilize service, there are no hard data on types of service and what they accomplish. This is due to a broad definition of service which ranges from cleaning trash in a park to participating in electoral campaigns, doing a walkathon to raise money for charity to rehabilitating dilapidated housing in an urban slum. With such variation, it is not possible to say that service as a generic term can or should have positive effects on citizenship development (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

This does not mean we lack knowledge of strategic application of service. To see these strategies at work, it is useful first to look at the ecology of service and

some of the distinctions it renders. First, much service is done off campuses at sites in the community, for example, food pantries, homeless shelters, or environmental projects. Second, these sites are sponsored and managed by organizations with missions to address specific problems such as poverty, homelessness, domestic abuse, or environmental degradation. Third, when students volunteer at sites, they not only perform service, but they also act out the mission of the sponsor. For instance, while they dish out food to hungry diners at a soup kitchen, they simultaneously practice a form of social justice such as, say, the sponsoring Catholic Worker or Salvation Army defines it (Allahyari, 2000). Fourth, the sponsoring organizations represent the mix of institutions that make up a key part of America's civil society where citizen action operates. Fifth, these organizations mediate between individual citizens and government. Thus, they serve as bridges to the political world and to various value traditions that are philosophical, religious, advocacy, or adversarial in orientation.

With this context in mind, it is possible to see why and when service functions to supplement civic education. Beane, Turner, Jones, and Lipka (1981), for example, reported longitudinal results for students who assisted in urban planning during a high school civics class. Fifteen or so years later as adults, these students were more likely to vote and to belong to volunteer organizations than were their peers whose civics class did not include service. Reinders and Youniss (2006) also reported short-term longitudinal results showing that students who believed that their service contributed to the mission of the sponsoring organization were, one year later, more civically and politically oriented than peers who did not feel their service made such a contribution.

Boyte (2004) provides conceptual clarification when he notes that service which empowers people to take citizen action constitutes public work, in contrast to charity or doing good. In this regard, the concept of public work comes close to promoting the kinds of citizenship Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified as participatory and social justice oriented. In either terminology, these forms of service show what schools can promote if they design civic classes accordingly (e.g., Youniss & Yates, 1997, for example). Numerous observers, from John Stuart Mill through the early 20th century political science commissioners, have noted that the habits of democratic citizenship are not easily attained through textbooks (Alperovitz, 2005). The 1916 commissioners made their point with the following citation: "The way to study German is to begin to talk and read German... So the way to teach civics... is to give boys and girls 'chores' or tasks that compel them to feel for civic ideals - i.e., to discharge and not merely to read about civic duties" (cited in Schachter, 1998, p. 4).

Service as public work and justice-oriented service are distinct from service as doing good or simply helping others. The distinction is exemplified by a contrast between providing food to hungry people at a soup kitchen and working on campaigns to provide affordable housing, job training, or mental health services (e.g., Boyte, 2004). The latter requires efforts to connect students to selective mediating organizations and monitoring the experiences that students are afforded. The likely payoffs are worthwhile insofar as students could begin to see what citizenship entails and realize that they are capable of participating in the ongoing work of civic institutions. In fact, it is a common finding that volunteers who partake of such service articulate this new view of themselves as actors within certain civic traditions be they Red Cross blood donors (Piliavin, Grube, & Callero, 2002) or practitioners of Christian social justice (Yates & Youniss, 1999). It is but a small step further to see how purposefully designed service provides nourishment for young people's emerging civic identities that textbook material alone might not be able to generate.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay, a certain kind of citizenship was assumed. This citizen would actively participate in shaping and responding to policy and government by partaking in civic organizations which represent interests and promote value traditions that have roots in religion, civic movements, social justice, and the like. Implied also is trust in and allegiance to the American democratic system where interests compete according to open rules, freedom of expression, including dissent, is honored, and membership with others in voluntary organizations is encouraged. There is no single value or way of thinking that defines American citizenship, but there is unity in a shared adherence to democracy as just stated. From a psychological perspective, this kind of citizenship entails having and practicing an American identity which involves not only participating in but protecting and appreciating the system of government and the politics which grounds it. Thus, civic education can be more than acquiring a set of facts, learning about rights and obligations, and becoming an informed voter. It is, at its psychological base, coming to know how to function in a democratic system and working to sustain it for oneself and for others.

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