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Teaching Democracy

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Imagine you were visiting a school in a totalitarian nation governed by a single-party dictatorship. Would the educational experiences be markedly different from the ones experienced by children in your local school? I do not ask this question facetiously. It seems plausible that good lessons in multiplication, chemistry or a foreign language—perhaps with some adjustments for cultural relevance and suitability—would serve equally well in most parts of the world. So if you stepped into a school somewhere on the planet and politely asked to observe some of the lessons, would you be able to tell whether you were visiting a school in a democratic nation or a totalitarian one? Or, conversely, if students from a totalitarian nation were secretly transported to a school in your neighborhood to continue their lessons with new teachers and a new curriculum, would they be able to tell the difference?

The children in your local school would probably learn how to read and write, just like students do in, say, North Korea or China. Students in your local school might learn to add numbers, do fractions, and solve algebraic equations. But that's what students in Uzbekistan learn too. Maybe students in your local school learn not to hit one another, to follow the rules, and not to break any laws. They might sing the national anthem and learn about asteroids and the life cycle of the glowworm. Maybe they even put on plays, learn a musical instrument, and paint pictures. I know of schools in Eritrea and Belarus that do those things too. Citizens in some of the least democratic countries in the world, governed by single-party authoritarian regimes, dictatorships or military juntas, learn a lot of the same things in school that our children learn.

So what goals should be different for schools in a democratic society? Should students in democratic countries learn how to participate in public decision making (the kind of participation that is required for democracy to function properly)? Should they be taught to see themselves as individual actors who work in concert with others to create a better society? Do schools in democratic societies teach students how to think for themselves and to govern collectively?

Most of us would like to believe that they do. While a school in North Korea, China or Iran might be teaching students blind allegiance to their nation's leaders and deference to the social and political policies those leaders enact, we would expect that schools in the United States would teach students the skills and dispositions needed to evaluate for themselves the benefits and drawbacks of particular policies and government practices. We would not be surprised to learn, for example, that North Korean children are taught to abide by an "official history" handed down by the single-party authoritarian regime. After all, a school curriculum that teaches one unified, unquestioned version of "truth" is one of the hallmarks of totalitarian societies.

Democratic citizens, however, should be committed to the principles and values that underlie democracy—such as political participation, free speech, civil liberties, and equal opportunity. Schools might develop these commitments through lessons in the skills of analysis and exploration, free political expression, and independent thought. None of this can be accomplished, however, if students do not learn the single most important prerequisite of democracy: how to ask questions about the way we live.

Questioning is the Engine of Democracy

There should be many ways that schools in democratic societies can be distinguished from their totalitarian counterparts. Here's one essential difference: schools in democratic societies must teach students how to ask challenging questions—the kinds of questions that are, at times, uncomfortable, the kinds that question tradition. Although most of us would agree that traditions are important, without any questioning there can be no progress. Students need practice in entertaining multiple perspectives and viewpoints on important issues that affect our lives. These issues can sometimes be controversial. But improving society requires embracing that kind of controversy so that citizens can engage in democratic dialogue and work together toward understanding and enacting the most sensible policy decisions possible. Questioning any single perspective and welcoming dissenting positions is the engine of democratic progress.

Why would we expect adults, even senators or members of Congress, to be able to intelligently and compassionately discuss different viewpoints in the best interests of their constituents if schoolchildren never or rarely get that opportunity in school? Students are too often shielded from matters that require thoughtful engagement with today's competing ideas even though that kind of engagement is exactly what democratic participation requires.

We might think this is obvious—that school reformers would do everything possible to ensure that teachers and students have plenty of opportunities to ask these kinds of questions. And our schools often support democratic dispositions in just such ways. But teaching and learning—in both public and independent schools—do not always conform to democratic goals and ideals. Tensions abound, and in recent years some of the very foundations of democratic engagement—such as opportunities for independent thinking and critical analysis—have become less and less common. If being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social assumptions, then that foundation of citizenship is at odds with recent trends in education policy.

The Attack on Critical Thinking

Research that colleagues and I have conducted over the past decade reveals a clear and troubling trend: much of current education reform is limiting the ways teachers can develop the kinds of attitudes, skills, knowledge and habits necessary for a democratic society to flourish. In fact, the goals of K-12 education have been shifting steadily away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and towards more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain. Pressures from policymakers, business groups and school boards, and a broad cultural shift in educational priorities, have resulted in schools being seen primarily as conduits for individual success. Increasingly, lessons aimed at exploring democratic responsibilities have been crowded out.

In many schools, ever more narrow curriculum frameworks emphasize preparing students for standardized assessments in math and literacy at the same time that they shortchange social studies, history and citizenship education. Moreover, there is a “democratic divide” in which higher achieving students, generally from wealthier neighborhoods, are receiving a disproportionate share of the kinds of citizenship education that sharpen students’ thinking about issues of public debate and concern. Curricular approaches that spoon-feed students to succeed on narrow academic tests teach students that broader critical thinking is optional. The last decade of school reform has seen education policy makers engaged in a myopic drive to make students better test-takers, rather than better citizens.

The high-stakes testing mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation further pushed to the margins educational efforts that challenge students to grapple with tough questions about society and the world. In a study by the Center on

Education Policy, 71 percent of districts reported cutting back on time for other subjects—social studies in particular—to make more space for reading and math instruction. Teachers are reporting that disciplines such as science, social studies and art are crowded out of the school day as a direct result of state testing policies.

As bad as that sounds, omitting lessons that might develop critical thinking skills is still different from forbidding them. Yet there are a number of examples of misguided education policies that seek to do exactly that. Ten years ago, Florida passed a stunning piece of legislation that served as a clarion warning call to educators everywhere who still believe schools should teach critical thinking. The 2006 legislation specified that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable”

Notably, an early version of the bill stated that “[t]he history of the United States shall be taught as genuine history and shall not follow the revisionist or postmodernist viewpoints of relative truth.” The goal of the bill’s designers was “to raise historical literacy” with a particular emphasis on the “teaching of facts.” For example, the bill required that only “facts” be taught when it comes to discussing the “period of discovery” and the early colonies. Did Florida become the first state to ban historical interpretation in public schools, thereby effectively outlawing critical thinking?

Of course, historians almost universally regard history as exactly a matter of interpretation; the competing interpretations are what make history so interesting. Historians and educators alike widely derided the mandated adherence to an official story embodied in the Florida legislation but, because Florida is not alone, the impact of such mandates should not be underestimated. The bill and other similar legislative examples of restricting history lessons to one “true” narrative remain on the books in Florida, Nebraska, Kansas and other states. For example, in 2014 more than 1,000 Jefferson County, Colorado high school students and hundreds of teachers walked out of classes to protest changes in the Advanced Placement (AP) history curriculum that sought to downplay the legacy of civil disobedience and protest in American history while promoting patriotism, respect for authority, and the benefits of the free enterprise system.

There is a certain irony to the idea that schools in a democratic nation can better prepare students to be democratic citizens by encouraging deference to authority and discouraging lessons about social movements and social change. In fact, a high school senior noted that students were protesting a curriculum that discourages protesting. “If they don’t teach

us civil disobedience,” she quipped, “we will teach ourselves.” *U.S. News & World Report* may have best captured the sentiments of outraged teachers, parents and students when it wrote that the Jefferson County proposal “isn’t about making better citizens. It’s about removing the very idea behind good citizenship—the very American premise that we choose our leaders, hold them accountable, demonstrate peacefully to make our views known and to question authority.”

At this point, you might be thinking that these restrictions apply to public school students but that independent schools are immune from these trends. Evidence indicates otherwise. As the goals for K–12 public education have shifted away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and toward more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain, private schools have, in many ways, led the pack. Echoing and amplifying the national preoccupation with individual economic success, independent school board members, parents and school leaders have sacrificed rich in-depth inquiry tailored to the local experiences and passions of individual teachers and students for increasingly standardized practice.

A steadily growing body of research in the United States now echoes what Tony Hubbard, former director of the United Kingdom’s Independent Schools Inspectorate, stated most plainly after reviewing data from an extensive study of British independent schools: Because of the immense pressure to achieve high academic results on exams and elevate schools’ prestigious college-entrance rates, independent schools are “over-directed” so that students do not have “sufficient opportunity or incentive to think for themselves.” Increasingly following formulas that “spoon-feed” students to succeed on narrow academic tests, independent schools, Hubbard warned, “teach students not to think.”

When schools focus on testing and achievement in the name of pedagogical efficiency or efficacy, time for in-depth critical analysis of ideas is diminished. Current school reform policies and many classroom practices too often reduce teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to take principled stands that have long been associated with democracies. Students are learning more about how to please authority and pass the tests than how to develop convictions and stand up for them.

What Kind of Citizen?

Many teachers across the country conduct excellent educational activities concerned with helping students become active and effective citizens

and certainly a number of those teachers teach in independent schools. But even when educators are explicitly committed to teaching “good citizenship,” it’s a good idea to take a closer look. My colleague Joe Kahne and I spent the better part of a decade studying programs that aimed to develop good citizenship skills among youth and young adults. In study after study, we come to similar conclusions: the kinds of goals and practices commonly represented in school programs that hope to foster democratic citizenship usually have more to do with voluntarism, charity and obedience than with democracy. In other words, “good citizenship” often means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen—not grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions that every citizen in a democratic society needs to understand.

Commonly called character education, these programs seek to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline and hard work. Or they hope to nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer community service. What they don’t do is ask students to understand social, political and economic structures or explore strategies for change that address root causes of problems. Voluntarism and kindness can be used to avoid much thinking about politics and policy altogether. Character traits such as honesty, integrity and responsibility for one’s actions are certainly valuable for becoming good neighbors and citizens. But, on their own, they are not about democracy.

Former President George H. W. Bush famously promoted community service activities for youth by imagining a “thousand points of light” representing charitable efforts to respond to those in need. But if young people understand these actions as a kind of *noblesse oblige*—a private act of kindness performed by the privileged—and fail to examine the deeper structural causes of social ills, then the thousand points of light risk becoming a thousand points of the status quo. Citizenship in a democratic community requires more than kindness and decency.

Teaching Democratic Thinking

Recall my earlier question: How would you know the difference between educational experiences in two schools—one in a totalitarian nation and one in a democratic one? Both classes might engage students in volunteer activities in the community—picking up litter from a nearby park perhaps, or helping out at a busy intersection near a school or in a senior center. Government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as

delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of character education: don't do drugs; show up to work on time; give blood; help others during a flood; recycle; etc. These are desirable traits for people living in any community. But they are not about democratic citizenship. In fact certain ideas promoted by these kinds of programs—obedience and loyalty, for example—may work against the kind of independent thinking that democratic citizenship requires.

For more than two centuries, democracy in the United States has been predicated on citizens' informed engagement in civic and political life and schools have been seen as essential to support the development of such citizens. Democracy is not a spectator sport. Students need to learn not passivity but, rather, that they have important contributions to make, not only in helping those in need but also in finding solutions to the causes of those needs. There are many varied and powerful ways to teach children and young adults to engage critically—to think about social policy issues, participate in authentic debate over matters of importance, and understand that intelligent adults can have different opinions. Indeed, democratic progress depends on these differences.

Approaches that aim to promote democratic thinking and action share several characteristics. First, teachers encourage students to ask questions rather than absorb pat answers—to think about their attachments and commitments to their local, national and global communities. Second, teachers provide students with the information (including competing perspectives) they need to think about subject matter in substantive ways. Third, they root instruction in local contexts, working within their own specific surroundings and circumstances because it is not possible to teach democratic forms of thinking without providing an environment about which to think. This last point makes standardized tests and standardized curriculum difficult to reconcile with in-depth critical thinking about issues that matter.

In the same way that Darwin's theory of natural selection depends on genetic variation, any theory of democracy depends on multiple perspectives and ideas. Darwin saw the need for spontaneous variations in the natural world as necessary for evolutionary progress of the species. Those of us who see in schools the possibility for social change and improvement should similarly embrace a multiplicity of ideas in the school curriculum. Students should be exposed to multiple perspectives and taught to think and to dialogue in the kinds of expansive ways in which democracy thrives.

What kind of society are we hoping our schools and their teachers will help to bring about? There are special requirements for teaching and learning in democratic societies. Chief among these are that students know how to think critically, ask questions, evaluate policy, and work with others toward change that moves democracy forward.

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