

Civic Education in the NCLB Era: The Contested Mission of Elementary and Middle Schools

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophic and historic foundations of educating for citizenship. Despite these foundations, like all of social studies, civic education at the elementary and middle levels has been curtailed due to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Implications of the reduction of elementary social studies instruction are examined. In addition, characteristics of civic education programs are described along with standards devised by the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 1994) and the National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education, 1994/2003). Civic education programs that teachers can utilize in elementary and middle school settings are also discussed.

Introduction

One of the most prominent historic goals of American schooling has been to prepare youth to become future citizens (Hahn & Torney-Purta, 1999). Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Madison noted early in America's history that a free society relies on the "knowledge, skills, and virtues of its citizens and those they elect to public office" (Center for Civic Education, 1994/2003, p. 1). Although it is vital that American citizens possess the knowledge, skills, and virtues needed to sustain democratic principles, it is equally vital that they possess these characteristics as citizens of a global society. The unfortunate current state of affairs, though, is that civic education—from both American and global perspectives—is in jeopardy.

In today's popular media there is agreement that educating youth for democratic citizenship in the United States and for their roles in a global society should remain critical functions of the schools. Even educators Diane Ravitch and Deborah Meier, who generally disagree regarding the purpose and philosophical foundations of American schools, agree that these institutions should "educate the citizens who will preserve the essential balances of power that democracy requires, as well as to support a sufficient level of social and economic equality, without which democracy cannot long be sustained" (Meier & Ravitch, 2006, p. 36). Teaching students the foundations of government, as well as virtuous character dispositions (e.g., honesty, responsibility, integrity), has been a part of our national education landscape since its earliest days. Preparing students for roles in an increasingly global community is another vital aspect of civic education. However, in the face of mounting pressure to teach only those

curricular areas that are included in mandatory assessments, many teachers neglect civic education.

In this paper I examine the contested mission of schools in American civic education. The philosophic and historic roots of this mission are described. Finally, I discuss the role played by national standards and the current state of civic education in America. Throughout this article, the terms citizenship education, civics, and civic education are used interchangeably to identify the courses, dispositions, and content of education for democratic citizenship.

Competing Philosophies of Democratic Education

The view of preparing youth for democratic citizenship can be traced back to Plato and other ancient Greek philosophers (Biesta, 2007). However, as Biesta postulates, the notion that education should prepare young people for roles in a democratic society is related to the ideas of Immanuel Kant and other philosophers. Biesta argues that Kantian philosophy leads one to conclude that democracy is dependent on the “ability of individuals to make use of their own reason *without direction from another*” (p. 749). Therefore, democratic education is reliant upon individuals learning to become rationally autonomous. This democratic concept is individualistic in nature. That is, maintenance of a democratic way of life depends on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individuals. This philosophy of educating for democratic citizenship has influenced the missions of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and other civic education organizations.

In contrast, John Dewey stated that democratic education results not only from cultivating individual rational thought, but through intelligent interchange. He further explained, “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1916/1944, p. 87). Moreover, democratic education is termed as a social process (Biesta, 2007). According to Biesta, in Dewey’s view education is not a matter of educating *for* democracy—preparing young people to assume civic roles; education is a matter of educating *through* democracy. Thus, in order to create a truly democratic society, schools and other institutions must reflect democratic processes and practices.

A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder. (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 99)

Dewey's philosophy concerning habits of mind and the consequences of actions upon habits (Dewey, 1922) has significantly impacted democratic education, specifically character and moral education (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

Hursh and Ross (2000) argue, "Citizenship is redefined as individual responsibility for economic productivity without regard for existing economic and social inequalities that undermine social welfare" (p. 6). They contend that government and corporations continually redefine education in order to meet business and economic needs. While the emphasis of individual development is reminiscent of Kant, the focus of this individual development is on serving the interests of capitalism, rather than democratic thinking. Thus, Hursh and Ross posit that the mission of schools must shift from educating for democratic citizenship to educating for global capitalistic citizenship. Moreover, they call for proactive civic education, where students are taught not to be passive citizens "limited to pulling voting booth levers every few years" (p. 6), but to be active citizens who question social outcomes and structures—including economic ones.

The Historic Civic Mission of American Schools

The teaching of skills needed to participate in a democracy has historically been viewed as a major responsibility of schools (Ochoa-Becker, Morton, Autry, Johnstad, & Merrill, 2001). Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American educators, Hannah Adams, Noah Webster, Caleb Bingham, and Jedediah Morse, designed American curricula "as a tool for nation-building and citizenship development" (Schwartz, 2001, p. 212). As teachers are currently preparing new generations for democratic life, so were the earliest American teachers who believed that schools played a vital role in educating for democracy (Branson, 2001; Schwartz, 2002). According to Schwartz, in order to sustain the fledgling United States, education for citizenship was the most essential purpose of the schools.

The only way to keep a democracy from slipping into corruption, tyranny, and degeneration was the careful education of all its participants. Every citizen had to be aware of his/her rights and responsibilities; every citizen also had to be a decent person. New citizens not only had to be familiar with America's new laws but had to actively participate in their preservation. (Schwartz, 2001, p. 220-221)

Reminiscent of Dewey, Greene writes, "Surely it is an obligation of education in a democracy to empower the young to become members of the public, to participate, and play articulate roles in the public space" (as cited in Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 7). Regardless of one's philosophy concerning citizenship education, this notion has historic foundations and is a necessary function of schools. This belief should not be neglected due to state and national

pressure to improve student performance on high-stakes assessments (Center on Education Policy, 2006; 2007; Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006).

As a subject area, civics or citizenship education typically falls squarely on the shoulders of social studies educators. As Adler (2001) states, "Social studies, after all, is about enabling young people to gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for being informed participants in a democratic society" (p. 3). In a similar vein, Brophy (1990) asserts that social studies as a content area was developed for the expressed purpose of citizenship education:

An influential report issued in 1916 by an NEA committee established "social studies" as the name of the content area and argued that the area should be informed by several social science disciplines in addition to history, that social education should be its primary purpose, and that content selection should be guided by consideration of its personal meaning and relevance to the student and its value in preparing the student for citizenship. (p. 356)

Nearly a century after the 1916 National Education Association (NEA) report, NCSS maintains that teaching citizenship is the central purpose of the social studies. Parker (2005) states, "Without historical understanding, there can be no wisdom. Without geographical understanding, there can be no social or environmental intelligence. And without civic understanding, there can be no democratic citizens and, therefore, no democracy" (p. 4). Citizenship or civics education is the cornerstone of the social studies. However, social studies instruction in elementary and middle schools takes place only if time remains after teaching reading, writing, and mathematics (Leming, Ellington, & Shug, 2006; Rock, et al., 2006). Thus, social studies teaching is totally neglected in some elementary and middle schools. This reality is suggestive of what Eisner (1994) calls the "null curriculum," what is *not taught* is seen as *not essential* in a student's educational experience. Lack of access to civics education results in grave consequences. Students deficient in the fundamental knowledge necessary for informed civic participation will struggle to achieve critical perspectives of society and culture.

Social Studies and Civics Left Behind

Although citizenship education is historically one of the foremost purposes for formalized schooling in America and is the primary mission of teaching social studies, it has lost prominence and priority in today's schools. As previously mentioned, reading and mathematics instruction have come to dominate the curriculum (von Zastrow & Janc, 2004). Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, elementary-level social studies instruction has been seriously impacted (Boston, 2005; Center on Education Policy, 2006; Rock, et al., 2006; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004). However, Heafner, Lipscomb,

and Rock (2006) found that teachers who value social studies, teach social studies regardless of pressures to emphasize other areas of the curriculum.

In a national survey concerning the perceived effects of testing programs, Pedulla, Abrams, Madaus, Russell, Ramos, & Miao (2003) concluded that the elementary curriculum is being narrowed and shaped by state-mandated assessments. In another national study, von Zastrow and Janc (2004) found that the reading, mathematics, and science accountability provisions of NCLB are diverting significant amounts of time away from other content areas. Reduction of time spent on social studies was greatest in elementary schools with high populations of minority students (von Zastrow & Janc). Therefore, a citizenship education divide aligns with the persistent achievement gap between minority and majority children (McGuire, 2007). This finding counters the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (as cited in Butts, 2001) that “civic learning through a public educational system must be available to all children and adolescents equally...” (p. 9).

The lack of civic education in high-poverty schools supports Anyon’s (1981) findings regarding the social stratification of knowledge. Students in high poverty schools are not exposed to the same depth of knowledge and rich curricular experiences as students in middle and upper class schools. If so, are we preparing only privileged students for leadership roles? Will the lack of civic education offered to our poorest students further disenfranchise them?

Character education programs featured in virtually all elementary schools are intended to teach students the dispositions and skills necessary to sustain our democracy. Although they may vary, elementary citizenship skills are generally described as the ability to view another’s perspective, work cooperatively, demonstrate respect for others and their property, complete tasks in a timely manner, resolve conflict appropriately, and follow school and classroom rules. However, civics content (government, laws, etc.) is typically found in the social studies domain. Relegating civics content to the discipline of social studies alone poses a problem if the teaching of social studies is neglected. Elementary students are expected to exhibit the dispositions of effective citizens, but learn little about the history or underlying principles and practices of democracy, or underlying structures of culture and society.

Characteristics of Civic Education Programs

Citizenship is often equated with simply obeying the rules (Adler, 2001). However, in its position statement, the NCSS (1997) notes that citizens must demonstrate commitment to principles such as popular sovereignty, rule of law, and religious liberty. Responsible citizens espouse values such as life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, equality, truth, and the promotion of the common good.

Students will hopefully develop or, at least, gain an awareness of these qualities within civic education experiences.

The National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education, 1994/2003) emphasize that instruction in civics should provide students with understanding of civic life, politics, and government. Furthermore, civics instruction should help students analyze American political and governmental issues in relation to the rest of the world. These national standards also elucidate the importance of learning how to responsibly and competently participate in one's own governance.

The historical background of government and politics, the dispositions necessary for civic life and civic content knowledge should all be present within the enacted curriculum. Teachers should also address the characteristics of competent citizenship and not rely on the notion that citizenship skills will be developed as a by-product of historical knowledge.

Many civic education programs present students with a balance between teaching about individual rights and responsibilities and participation in public affairs for the "common good" (Apple & Beane, 1995; Clark, 1999; Gonzales, Riedel, Avery, & Sullivan, 2001; NCSS, 1994). Hahn and Torney-Purta (1999) suggest other indicators of quality civic education programs. Civic education should be cross-disciplinary, participatory, related to the lives of students, conducted in a non-authoritarian environment, and presented by teachers who are aware of the challenges of social diversity. Additionally, Clark notes that quality civics courses should maintain four assumptions. They are: (1) citizenship education is essential; (2) citizenship education should help students understand the importance of gaining a sense of membership in their local communities; (3) citizenship education should teach students how to be effective contributors in their local communities; and (4) citizenship education should be integrated across all subject areas.

According to Hahn (2001) and Parker (2005), effective civic education programs are best situated in open democratic climates. In fact, when total school climate is conducive to democratic discourse, student citizenship attributes are more evident than in schools whose climate is not democratic (Hansen & Childs, 1998). As noted earlier, Dewey (1916/1944) argued that democratic processes and practices should be enacted throughout the schools (and society) if the development of a democratic citizenry is a desired outcome. Although teachers often have little control over school climate as a whole, they are responsible for the conditions that are present within their own classrooms (Hinde, 2003). Therefore, quality civics learning takes place in classrooms where teachers provide an atmosphere conducive to democratic discourse. Indeed, even in the earliest grades where the pressure is intense to teach students the principles of literacy and numeracy, teachers can involve students within

functioning democracies by weaving civics instruction throughout learning in all content areas.

Standards for Citizenship/Civics

Despite the lack of time afforded to social studies instruction, civic standards have been developed in an effort to increase achievement and advance knowledge of civics and government. The National Council for the Social Studies first published standards for social studies learning in 1994. According to the NCSS, social studies standards are meant to provide a framework for the individual disciplines (civics and government, economics, geography, and history). The NCSS standards “address overall curriculum design and comprehensive student performance expectations, while the individual discipline standards provide focused and enhanced content detail” (1994, p. viii). The civics strand of the NCSS standards succinctly states that “social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic” (p. 30). These standards focus specifically on the citizenship skills necessary for active participation. Additionally, the NCSS standards emphasize the structure of government at a national level, as well as the ideals from which the government was established. Two additional focus areas address individual rights and responsibilities, as well as citizen action for “the common good.” This notion of regarding importance of “the common good” is reiterated throughout the document.

Unlike the NCSS, which developed their standards independently, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the U.S. Department of Education provided funds to the Center for Civic Education to create the National Standards for Civics and Government, also known as the National Civics Standards (Center for Civic Education, 1994/2003). These particular standards are more limited than the NCSS standards and thus, more easily evaluated. The National Civics Standards are written as sets of questions that are intended to serve as a curricular framework for civics education. Questions are critical in nature and leave much room for democratic discourse. These standards pose questions such as, “What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?” Each question is followed by related background information for teachers (Center for Civic Education). The Center for Civic Education argues that provision of correct answers to all grade level questions indicates evidence of a student’s civic understanding.

While National Civics Standards are limited to lists of skills and knowledge, if presented in a democratic climate, the standards can be especially helpful to elementary teachers who might not teach social studies or civics at all. They provide teachers who do not possess the skills or motivation to teach

civics with important guidelines for teaching lessons, even if the lessons are content-oriented and do not emphasize critical thinking.

It is clear that schools are not solely responsible for equipping young people with the attributes needed for effective citizenship. In fact, as Biesta (2007) notes, “The ultimate task for democratic education therefore lies in society itself, and *not* in its educational institutions. Schools can neither create nor save democracy...” (p. 765). Although schools play a vital role in educating for democracy and global citizenship, as Biesta stressed, they cannot and should not do it alone.

Support for the Civic Mission of the Schools

Civic-minded citizens might ask the following questions: Has the mission of schools changed? Is the primary purpose of schools still to prepare youth to assume the role of citizen (Hahn & Torney-Purta, 1999)? Within an era of testing and accountability, time and resources have been shifted to support reading and mathematics instruction at the expense of teaching for democratic citizenship. Thus, the burden for citizenship education rests on families, religious institutions, and the media—not the schools. If their current instructional focus is an indicator of the schools’ mission, then, clearly, preparing youth for democratic citizenship is not the mission of America’s public elementary and middle schools.

However, hope for the civic mission of public schools is not completely lost. In response to government mandates regarding curricular emphasis on subjects other than the social studies, many civic organizations have created programs to support civic education. For instance, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Council for Excellence in Government has organized the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (<http://www.civicmissionofschools.org>). The purpose of this campaign is to restore educational commitment and capacity as students prepare to assume their places in democracy. Their call to action specifically asks Congress and the President to recognize and provide for civic learning when considering the upcoming reauthorization of NCLB. Additionally, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) and the First Amendment Center joined forces in 2001 to create First Amendment Schools. This initiative provides resources for educators “committed to transforming how First Amendment principles are modeled and taught” (Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson, Hudson, & Thomas, 2003, p. 17).

Another organization, The Center for Civic Education, has initiated the Campaign to Promote Civic Education (<http://www.civiced.org>) in an attempt to restore citizenship education in America’s classrooms. This campaign was initiated in response to the NAEP 1998 Civics Report Card to the Nation (U.S. Department of Education, 1999) and various studies and surveys documenting

lack of civic knowledge among American youth. The Campaign to Promote Civic Education offers K-12 recommendations intended to bolster civic knowledge. Additionally, the Center for Civic Education provides a wealth of teacher resources through its *We the People* and *Project Citizen* programs.

Often-cited criticisms of the aforementioned programs are that they are heavy on content, light on activism, and place emphasis on First Amendment rights. These programs also address aspects of global citizenship in a superficial way. However, if these programs are accessible, and placed in the hands of democratically-minded teachers, they can be used to teach, not only the content of civics, but also the process of helping students become active democratic citizens.

Conclusion

The philosophies of Kant, Dewey, and others have influenced current discussions regarding education for democratic citizenship. Whether teachers educate *for* democracy or *through* democracy continues to be the topic of substantive discussions about social studies education. However, these philosophic discussions are often undermined, given the mandates and pressures of high-stakes testing and accountability. In the era of NCLB, while citizenship education has taken a proverbial backseat to literacy and mathematics education, social educators are ardent in their assertions that civic education must not be lost in a mad scramble to increase student achievement scores.

It is vital in our present age of globalization that standards respond to the needs of 21st century citizens. If standards are truly guiding the curriculum, then state and national standards must respond to increasing global interdependence by emphasizing participation in and understanding of both global and local communities. If democracy is to be sustained on both a local and global level, determined civic educators must reflect upon the historic importance of educating an emerging citizenry and refocus the mission of American public schools.

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