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EMBRACING ACTION:

EDUCATION FOR CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The aims of public schools are many and much debated. Schools are widely expected to prepare students for entrance to institutions of higher education and/or the workforce and to aid in the socialization of students into society. Though perhaps somewhat less widely considered as being a fundamental aim of public schools, I believe that the preparation of students for active participation in democracy is among the most important missions of public schools.

At a basic level, American democracy depends on a large number of citizens from a broad array of backgrounds informing themselves about candidates for public office and voting. But there is a great deal more citizens must do in order for American democracy to be vibrant. Citizens must inform themselves about issues of public importance and express their opinions in an effective way to their elected officials. Further, citizens should be able to participate in public discourse about issues of significance. They should be able to express their views in a way that is persuasive and contributes to collective understanding of issues of import. And not just on national politics – American democracy depends on the active participation of individuals working together to change their communities for the better. American democracy functions effectively only when individuals from all backgrounds and perspectives take action to make democracy meaningful by involving themselves in civic life.

To be involved, these individuals need to have knowledge about issues of public importance, a wide range of skills, an interest in being involved, and an understanding of their ability to make a difference. The public school system is perhaps the only institution in the country that can help a large proportion of the population from a broad array of backgrounds get the knowledge, skills, and interest they need to be actively involved in American democracy.

As such, it is unsurprising that civics courses are offered in public schools across the country. The mere presence of civics courses does not, however, indicate that schools are fulfilling their mission. Courses often focus on teaching facts about how the American political system works, student mastery of which can easily be evaluated through standardized testing, failing to prepare students to be engaged participants in all levels of democracy. In teaching the details of how American democracy works, the central point of the system – that it depends on the active participation of a wide range of citizens in affecting how their communities are administered, both inside and outside of the political process, at all levels of government, local to national – is lost.

The mission of civic education should be to inspire students to take civic action and to prepare students for that action. Taking that mission into consideration, we should rethink how public schools execute civic education. It should be structured to give students the following things:

1. Knowledge of the formal processes of American democracy.
2. Understanding of America's history of civic participation, including social movements.
3. Detailed understanding of issues of particular importance in their local communities.
4. Proficiency in persuasive speaking and writing.
5. Comfort working with people from a diversity of backgrounds.
6. Understanding of arguments made by people on different sides of issues of public debate.
7. Understanding of common methods used to sway public opinion and the opinions of decision makers.
8. Grassroots leadership skills including the ability to inspire/interest others, to engender participatory processes and community involvement, to plan courses of action, etc.
9. The realization that individual and collective action can make a difference.
10. Inspiration to take action.

These goals should be taken into account in the pedagogy, administration, and curriculum of schools.

Pedagogy

Issues of civic participation should not simply be included in the curriculum – the pedagogy should support the subject matter. William Ayers describes a split between education and the teaching that is dominant in most school systems across the country.

Education is surprising and unruly and disorderly, while the first and fundamental law of school is to follow orders. Education frees the mind, while schooling bureaucratizes the brain. An educator unleashes the unpredictable, while a schoolteacher sometimes starts with an unhealthy obsession with a commitment to classroom management and linear lesson plans. (Ayers, xxiii)

To foster deep civic participation, schools must move towards educating and away from schooling. Students should be respected as people able to make change – to teach students that they can change the world, students need to see this demonstrated in the classroom. Teachers shouldn't be limited to teaching a very confined curriculum. Instead they should design classes to match student interests – teachers should act like

good community organizers, meeting students where they are, helping students to discover their interests and bringing students to action. That action should include intensive learning and also, perhaps, trying to affect change in the community. Additionally, teachers should help students to learn from their peers, in the process developing communication skills and learning to communicate with people from different backgrounds.

School Administration

It's difficult to teach deep civic participation and democracy in part because those concepts don't match up to the school experience. Schools are not generally administered in a democratic way – students often have very little ability to influence school administration, how their classes are run, what material they learn, etc. It is difficult to instill in students an ethic of civic participation and engagement in the national democratic process when their individual school community largely doesn't demonstrate these things. As much as possible, schools should encourage meaningful student engagement in many aspects of their school administration. Student councils should be given real responsibilities, student evaluations of classes should be taken seriously, students should be taught how decisions are made at the school and within the school district and should learn how they can influence decisions. Deep civic participation and engagement in democracy often takes place in the local community; students could learn a great deal about participation in democracy as a whole by participating in decision-making at the school and school district level.

Curriculum

Schools should require students to take civics courses that are focused on educating students in the ten areas of civic knowledge identified above. To be successful, these courses must actively engage students in the subject matter. A project-focused approach to civic education has particular potential and is discussed below.

Students should learn the skills and knowledge needed for extensive civic participation as part of the general curriculum, not just in course units focusing specifically on the topic. The opportunities for inclusion are virtually limitless, but a quick highlight tour of possibilities would include:

1. History classes could include extensive discussion of citizen leaders and movements for social change.
2. English classes could include discussion of the persuasive and informative writing that citizen leaders use.

3. In math classes, students could learn basic statistics and the importance of quantitative analysis to many public policy decisions.
4. Grassroots organizing skills could be taught as part of a communication course.

The inclusion of civic participation related material in courses across the curriculum would give students a wide assortment of knowledge and skills that are needed for active participation in democracy.

Project-Focused Civic Education

A project-focused civics curriculum has particular potential to educate students in civic participation. Teachers would help students flesh out what they are interested in and would encourage them to connect those interests with actionable issues of community/civic importance. Teachers, perhaps with the help of community volunteers, would advise students as they move to do something to change the issue for the better, guiding students, educating them on necessary skills, and encouraging and helping students to work with people from a wide variety of backgrounds. The possibilities for student action are limitless and include a wide range of actions appropriate for students of any age, experience level, interest, etc. Possible actions could include creating a letter-writing campaign, organizing a community forum, creating a student group to address an issue, meeting with decision makers, and making signs to inform the public. In working on projects they are interested in and that are of community significance, under the advisement of a teacher and/or community mentor, students could learn a great deal about an issue and about the organizing, writing, communication, and other skills that are of tremendous importance for active and deep civic participation. More importantly, such projects would help give students an understanding of the importance of taking action and would help students realize they can make a difference.

Teachers would have to manage to help students figure out what they are interested in and help them connect those interests to do-able projects. Teachers would have to support different students/student groups search out information on issues, connect them with community partners, and advise students throughout the project. The teachers would have to simultaneously advise multiple students working on different projects, ensuring that they see the connections between their individual projects/interests and civic participation and are in the process developing the skills and interest needed for sustained participation. Further, teachers would have to help ensure that students see some progress as a result of their efforts – without successes, projects can serve to dishearten rather than engage students.

Rather than running away from the controversial issues that will likely be brought into the classroom with these projects, teachers should support students in working on such

issues in a respectful, thoughtful, effective way. Controversial issues are what bring many into active civic participation – they should not be hidden from students when they are in the classroom. Instead teachers should focus on ensuring that discussion is respectful and that students understand a diverse range of perspectives. Much learning can come from controversy. Teaching students to confront controversial issues will help them to build common bonds across difference and to investigate different sides of arguments.

Skilled teachers who are trained in teaching a project-based curriculum and have the support of community volunteers could overcome these challenges. If teachers are successful, they will educate students in the knowledge and skills needed for active civic participation, both in the material students are exposed to and how they are exposed to it, and will prompt students to take civic action.

Public schools play a tremendously important role in American democracy – the school system is a key institution that gives young citizens the knowledge and skills they need to participate actively in civic life. We need to do more than merely teach students accepted facts about the formal workings of the democracy that serves them. Doing so does not demonstrate the tremendous importance of individual action at all levels, local to national, that is required for a vibrant democracy. The inclusion of civics content throughout the general curriculum, the utilization of pedagogies that model the actions desired of students, the administration of schools in a way that supports what students are learning in the classroom, and the use of a project-based approach to teaching civic participation are some of the many possible ways that schools can support the development of active participants in American democracy.

References

Adams, Maurianne; Bell, Lee Anne; Griffin, Pay. Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice. New York: Routledge, 1997.

A sourcebook on teaching diversity and social justice, this book includes a brief introduction to the theoretical foundations for social justice education and detailed curriculum designs to address such issues as racism and sexism in the classroom.

Ayers, William (ed); Hunt, Jean Ann (ed); Quinn, Therese (ed). Teaching for Social Justice. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998.

A collection of many articles on the teaching of social justice. Of particular interest is the first chapter, “Education for Action – Preparing Youth for Participatory Democracy.”

<http://www.civiced.org>

The website of the Center for Civic Education includes an array of materials on civic education. Of particular interest is the Project Citizen curriculum to teach middle school students civic participation through active projects.

<http://www.civicmissionofschools.org>

A thorough report authored by the Carnegie Corporation and the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, that addresses a wide variety of civic education issues and makes recommendations for implementation of improved civic education. The report addresses many of the issues brought up in this paper. In addition to online access to the report, this website also includes grant requests for programs at the state level to implement the report's recommendations.

<http://www.civicyouth.org>

The website of the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement includes a wealth of information on many issues of civic engagement, including many reports. Of particular interest is the civic engagement newsletter visitors can sign up for. Reports to look at include "Skills for Effective Action," a thorough literature review on civic education, and "Promoting Positive Citizenship: Preparing Youth for Action." The website also provides a series of "Quick Facts" on civic education.

Colby, Anne; Ehrlich, Thomas; Beaumont, Elizabeth; Stephens, Jason. Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

A thorough discussion of civic education at the undergraduate level, much of which is also applicable at the high school level.

Dewey, John. Democracy and Education. New York: Macmillan, 1916.

A classic work on the philosophy of education that connects the education system and the success of democracy.

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/44/03/4403.pdf>

An article, "Building Community Through Service-Learning: The Role of the Community Partner," about a project-based class in which middle school students managed a piece of an experimental forest and the relationships with community partners that allowed the project to be successful.

Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Opressed. New York: Seabury Press, 1968.

A manifesto that, among many other things, critiques the “banking” concept of education and argues for breaking the strict separation between student and teacher.

Kahne, Joseph and Westheimer, Joel. “Democracy and Civic Engagement: What Schools Need to Do.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2003, volume 85, issue 1, page 34.

A lengthy and insightful article that describes what schools are doing in the area of civic education and argues for the use of new approaches to the topic.

Lakes, Richard D. *Youth Development and Critical Education: The Promise of Democratic Action*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

A collection of case studies of programs across the United States in which youth take action to affect community change and learn in the process.

Parker, Walter C. (ed). *Educating the Democratic Mind*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

A collection of essays by a variety of twentieth century thinkers about education for democracy, which together provide a thorough introduction to thinking about civic education.

<http://www.responsiveeducation.org/>

The Institute for Responsive Education website addresses issues of community partnership in education through a newsletter and publications.

<http://www.servicelearning.org/>

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse website includes many resources on a large number of issues associated with education for civic participation. Of particular interest is the report, “Youth Voice: A Guide for Engaging Youth in Leadership and Decision-Making in Service-Learning Programs.”