

CIVIC LITERACY IN A GLOBAL AGE: IMPERATIVES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Introduction

It is a commonplace in the discourse about the curriculum of public schools that students should be prepared to participate in a global society and that a strong emphasis in content and skills related to English/language arts, mathematics, and science coursework is a major part of that preparation. Many politicians and educators have advocated for a strong academic core that also includes social studies, fine arts, and physical education. * Behind much of this rhetoric is a legitimate concern that our students are falling behind their “competition” in Europe, India, and Asia. This then translates into concern for the economic future of our country, and fear that we will not be able to compete with societies that are doing a “better” job of educating a significant number of their citizens.

Even though there is some general agreement that schools should play a major role in the development of literate citizens, there is a significant debate in both educational and political circles as to what constitutes the requisite ingredients for thoughtful participation in modern, global democratic societies (Vandenberg, 2000). All societies need to prepare their youth for literacy, but our task is a more difficult one as educators in the United States. We must prepare our students to be active participants in a global, *democratic* society. While the authors certainly have not developed a “gold standard” for such preparation, we are working on a promising approach with our educational community at Malcolm Price Laboratory School. In this article we highlight the complexity of the task, and provide some brief examples of how we are addressing this important topic.

There is considerable disagreement in the United States about the core attributes of competent, literate citizens beyond the knowledge and skills developed through high quality teaching and learning in reading, mathematics, and science. Clearly civic literacy is underemphasized in national and state educational policy (Cornett, 2004). It is barely visible in the “No Child Left Behind” policy. Even in circles where significant, systematic civic education is supported, the tensions related to what constitutes high quality civic education are apparent and may be characterized by the push and pull between the interests of *pluribus* and *unum* (Butts, 1980).

Part of the reason for the conflict, beyond basic politics, is the philosophical chasm between preparation of citizens as efficient consumers and passive recipients of whatever “flavor” of politics is represented by the majority of the participants in the three branches of our federal and state governments, and the development of citizens capable of highly reflective critique of the political process with resultant *knowledgeable* activism. We believe that our citizens must be efficient and critical consumers, as well as thoughtful participants in shaping society.

The potential civic education subject matter itself is also vast and complex. For example, the multiple, complex issues embedded in the notion of freedom of expression and religion as played out in the history of the United States Constitution bear examination and continuous study by students. ^b Typically, these are addressed at some level in American history and government courses, and law-related education electives. However, many teachers are ill prepared to address these issues unless they have significant depth in history, political science, and/or law. We believe that “less is more” related to civic literacy curriculum and that schools should concentrate on key topics and themes, and not attempt to stress broad and thin coverage of material over depth of understanding by students.

Within the First Amendment discussion, some scholars would argue about the need for an unfettered press that has the will and independence to promote democracy (West, 2004, p. 39). Others have chronicled the tentative nature of that freedom of the press and other First Amendment rights throughout American history, especially during times of war (e.g., Stone, 2004). Of course, these tensions are all too evident in the current global context, with struggles between safety and security colliding full-force with questions on the limits on personal privacy. Some citizens demand protection from terrorism at any cost, while others protest against the erosion of civil liberties faced by citizens and non-citizens alike. Nelson (2005) states that, “...the war on terrorism and legislation such as the Patriot Act highlight the persistent difficulties related to determining the proper balance between speech and other values” (p. 1).^c

The struggle for this proper balance was evident in the sedition trials during the Adams administration, in the *habeus corpus* decisions in the Lincoln presidency, in the “Red Menace” era in the early Cold War period, and continues in the present Bush administration where changes in executive branch behavior related to search and seizure, due process, *habeus corpus*, and other hallmarks of democratic society have been evident. As Landman suggests, “The debates over executive

power in an age of terror raise fundamental questions about the proper allocation of power in our constitutional system of government” (p. 97). Students should be brought into those debates, and held responsible for understanding the basic aspects of the hallmarks of freedom in our society and the threats to these freedoms from within the United States and from foreign enemies. They should assist in holding our government officials accountable for their actions and must demonstrate concern for foreign threats as well as the erosion of civil liberties.

There are many other issues in the current political context that bear examination throughout the curriculum. Of course the issues related to the “global war on terrorism” and our current involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are central to much of the public concern and should be on the minds of our students. In addition, we are currently in the midst of yet another debate on the nature of immigration, the rights of immigrants, and the tension among economic impact (positive and negative) on the nation’s economy, and opportunities for citizenship in the world’s oldest democracy that was built on successive waves of immigrants from throughout the world. Lessons learned on the treatment of various immigrants, legal and illegal, are relevant in the current discourse (e.g., see Salyer, 1996, on the social and legal history of immigration policies between 1891 and 1924). The same can be said for the changes in a society that at one time banned interracial marriage, prohibited women from certain professions, and required certain businesses to be closed on Sundays (Wallenstein, 2004).

Accepting the Challenge for this Generation

While citizenship, civic literacy, and civic engagement is “A Challenge for All Generations” (see Kurtz, Rosenthal, and Zukin, 2003), it is a *direct* challenge to social studies educators and school leaders to help determine the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that need to be a part of the curriculum in our schools.

While it might be uncommon to find a school district that did not include development of democratic citizens in their mission statements, it is uncommon to find entire school systems focused upon elements of civic literacy across grade levels and subject matter. We believe it is the responsibility of *all teachers and administrators* to model democratic ideals and incorporate core concepts into their instruction wherever possible. Certainly, social studies educators bear a significant part of the responsibility for sharing their knowledge about citizenship with their colleagues so that this goal is not just addressed in the shrinking social

studies curriculum. They also should meet the needs of all students, including those with disabilities, as they develop the civic competencies necessary for full participation in our society (Hamot, Shokoohi-Yekta, and Sasso, 2005).

MPLS Citizenship Program

At MPLS we are working to enhance instruction across grade levels and across the curriculum to begin to fill the civic literacy gap through a heightened attention to democratic literacy. The First Amendment Schools (FAS) Project serves as a conceptual framework for much of this work. In conjunction with FAS, our school emphasizes curriculum and instruction related to four key themes: 1) the creation of a laboratory of democratic freedom; 2) commitment to school attention to the balance of democratic rights and responsibilities; 3) inclusion of all stakeholders or citizens in working for the common good; and 4) linking civic literacy to community engagement.^d

There are some guiding principles that should be evident and some core concepts that should be emphasized in the teaching and learning environment in 21st century schools and throughout the K-12 educational landscape. According to the CIRCLE (2003) report, research indicates six promising approaches to civic education (we italicize the approaches that are quoted from the report, our examples are provided in the accompanying text and are not italicized):

1. *Provide instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.*
Our students have the opportunity to complete the “We the People” program in 8th grade study. They also have the opportunity to learn about the Constitution and the law through First Amendment law cases in history, government, and criminal law courses.
2. *Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.*
Students learn about current issues throughout the grade levels and throughout the curriculum. For example, middle school students are asked to locate newspaper articles that have a First Amendment theme.

3. *Design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.*

Students in the fifth grade studied issues related to hunger and developed activities to support the local food bank. High school students are expected to complete a minimum of 15 hours of community service each year in consultation with their advisors.

4. *Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools and communities*

More than 85 % of our students participate in extracurricular activities, and 50% are engaged in three or more. A self-study indicates a direct correlation between high participation in multiple activities and high grade point averages at our school.

5. *Encourage student participation in school governance.*

All students are encouraged to participate in school governance through student council and the principal's cabinet. Students elect representatives to these forums. In addition, grade level advisory meetings serve to funnel student issues to the governance structure.

6. *Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. (p. 6)*

Students participate in mock trials, model legislature activities, and debate. Also, the principals have accepted student generated petitions and have engaged in discussions and actions related to these petitions when appropriate.

While the formal and informal curriculum and extracurricular activities provide many opportunities for children to gain democratic knowledge, skills, and attitudes, we believe we need to continue to build more linkages across the social studies and across the entire curriculum.

Cornett (2004) suggests that social studies educators, civic educators, law-related educators, and character educators join forces to teach core constructs throughout the curriculum that overlap the formal subjects and activities. These include the following: caring, citizenship, civic virtue, equality, fairness, honesty, justice, law, liberty, power, property, respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness.¹

1. These attributes are often associated with character education curricula, and are core variables in guidelines for federal grants related to civic literacy.

In addition, we work diligently to enhance the pedagogy of both our preservice and inservice teachers. We emphasize the importance of subject matter preparation and also the foundational nature of care theory in our organization. Research conducted in law-related and civic education illustrates that,

... the best and worst teachers fall along a broad continuum in two areas: 1) subject matter competence and the ability to translate content into learning opportunities for children that are developmentally appropriate; and 2) nurturance and positive character attributes that ensure that each child is supported in a safe and positive classroom and school climate. Strength in subject matter and nurturance capacities are a necessity for excellence in teaching and learning to take place (Cornett, 2001, p. 16).

Our shorthand code for this is striving to have teachers be “two for two,” both caring and excellent in their subject matter and how to teach it.

This emphasis in pedagogy and focus on key concepts has been supported by many preservice teacher educators and faculty at Price Laboratory School as very important, but it is difficult to implement due to the demands of the existing curriculum as well as the lack of professional preparation by many teachers related to these constructs. We are working with the faculty to continue to strengthen this area and expose almost 700 preservice teachers in all teaching majors at UNI to these ideas. We also have engaged with a partner institution in Russia, Herzen Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg, Russia, in the examination of these themes within our different political and educational contexts.

Conclusion

Finally, we are encouraging examination of “The Essentials of Law-Related Education” published by the American Bar Association in 1995 as potential guidance for new curricula and revision of the existing curriculum where appropriate. For example, under the concept of “liberty” the following are highlighted as core subject matter elements:*

- *Concept of human rights—including individual, political, social, and economic rights*
- *Principle of “ordered liberty”*
- *Fundamental constitutional rights*
- *Civil rights*
- *The way preserving liberty has been a motivating ideal for individuals and groups in American and other societies (historical and contemporary). (p. 8)*

We are building our partnership with the American Bar Association and other national resources to strengthen our links with other professions such as the legal community so that we can collaborate with others in the educational process. It is clear that we need to systematically involve outside subject matter experts as well as administrators, parents, students, and researchers in the difficult task of delivering a high quality civic literacy program (Cornett, 2001).

We are confident that these ongoing efforts will better prepare students to become thoughtful, skillful, and active citizens. As Governor Vilsack (2006) stated, we have a responsibility to, “...do whatever we need to do to ensure that this country continues to be the beacon of hope and freedom it was intended to be. In order for that to happen we need to have a strong and functioning economy, in order for that to happen we need to have innovative and creative people, in order for that to happen we have to have great schools, in order to have great schools we have to have great school leaders.”²

Certainly, we agree that we have such a responsibility as school leaders. As the Governor suggests, we have to enhance our innovation and creativity, and as Director Judy Jeffrey suggests, we must continue to improve math and language literacy at all levels. But, just as importantly, if not more so, we must strengthen meaningful civic education in our schools. For, we might become great at other forms of literacy, and yet emerge as a fascist or totalitarian society. As Tarcov suggests, “If democracy is to be not simply an empowerment, but also a challenge for the people, then the people and their chosen leaders need education in order to be prepared to rise to that challenge” (pg. 1) We are confident the social studies educators and the leaders of Iowa and the United States will rise to that challenge.

2. Governor Vilsack, remarks at the School Administrators of Iowa Annual Conference, August 10, 2006
http://governor.state.ia.us/video/2006/060810/wm_fast.html

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(Endnotes)

- a Iowa's Model Core Curriculum (MCC) elaborates on the type of education that allows a society to maintain its cultural and structural stability by articulating that it should focus on putting students first and meeting the demands of a changing workforce and global competition, all while keeping rigor and relevance at the forefront (MCC p. 6). Essential literacy skills are a major component. Students must be able to "become informed, inform others and make informed decisions" (MCC p. 7). While it is not enough to simply possess these skills, citizens must use these skills to productively contribute to society. Additionally, education should have at its heart "the mastery of reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking. And, with the explosion in visual mediums delivering messages, viewing is effectively included" (MCC p. 7). Any society whose citizens lack these essential literacy skills would be unable to maintain any sense of stability, as the citizens would be unable to participate in a literate, global society. The social studies curriculum is included in "next steps." See Model Core Curriculum for Iowa high Schools, Final Report to the State Board of Education, May 2006.
- b Teachers and administrators in our school have copies of *The First Amendment in Schools* by Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson, Hudson, and Thomas (2003). It is an comprehensive and easy to read source that is targeted to the application of the First Amendment in school settings. There are a number of recent texts that provide more in-depth coverage of this topic applied to the broader context of American society as a whole. The authors recommend the following authors: Stone, Seidman, Sunstein, Tushnet, and Karlan, 2003; Abrams, 2005; Garvey and Schauer, 1996; and Nelson, 2005. See the references section for full citations.
- c We have included as part of the inservice education of our faculty, a newspaper publisher, as a speaker on the importance of the freedom of the press. This speech outlined issues related to President Bush's need to protect the safety of American citizens in this age of terrorism, but also the significant danger of a number of his policies that have impaired the ability of the press to serve as a watchdog of government activities. A significant number of students get much of their information from television, not newspapers. For an excellent source on the history of these issues as applied to electronic media, see Carter, Franklin, and Wright, 2003.
- d (see Miller and Struck in this volume for more detail about FAS and elementary level citizenship activities).
- e The "Essentials ..." can be accessed through the ABA's website on public education at www.abanet.org/publiced. Additional resources including briefs on forthcoming Supreme Court cases are continually updated prior to Supreme Court hearings. Students and teachers can review the issues in the cases prior to the Court's rulings, follow the arguments of the parties, then compare the Court's decision with their own viewpoints.