

THE AFTERMATH OF 9-11-01: RENEWED INTEREST IN EXAMINING DEMOCRATIC ROOTS

by

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Educating students to exhibit the virtues of democratic citizenship has always been a role of America's schools (Barber, 1998; Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Lewis & Schaps, 1999; Benninga, 1991; Clark, 1999; Glickman, 1998; Helsep, 1989; Hoffman, 2000; Houston, 1998; Kane, 1984; Wood, 1992). From the earliest days of the republic, James Madison identified the importance of personal virtue among the general populace when addressing characteristics of a secure democracy:

Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks, no form of government, can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people is a chimerical. (As cited in NCSS Position Statement, 1997, p. 1)

Education in Madison's post-Revolutionary War period was valued for promoting nationalism and developing moral character (Spring, 2001). Later, between 1880 and 1920, when wave after wave of European immigrants

reached the shores of America, schools inculcated American democratic values and “socialized” citizens into American society (Kliebard, 1995).

As a result of World War II and the Cold War, schools were later perceived as a protective social device to preserve democracy from the totalitarian threat abroad. Violas (1973) stated that during World War II and after “the school had to do more than simply facilitate national unity. Its role now included the preparation of the sentinels of democracy...the teacher (was to) become an instrument of national policy and indoctrinate his students for patriotism and against communism” (p. 174).

The schools’ role in national security was not the only result of World War II. Confidence in America’s schools and the teachers that occupied its classrooms faced unparalleled challenges in the decades following World War II. Just as the role of schools in national security was examined following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the terrorist environment that produced the events of September 11, 2001, again thrust America’s schools into a renewed investigation of their role concerning national security. From McCarthyism of the 1950s to the school violence of the 1990s, America’s schools sometimes staggered under the pressures of unprecedented social change.

Lickona (1992) articulated the purpose of teaching democratic values from the perspective of the collective common good:

Democracy . . . is the best way we know of securing our individual rights (respecting persons) and promoting the general welfare (acting responsibly for the good of all). Teaching an understanding and appreciation of these democratic values—and how they are made realities through the laws of the land—is a central part of the school’s moral charge. These values also help us define the kind of “patriotism” that schools should teach. In a democracy, patriotism doesn’t mean “My country, right or wrong;” it means loyalty to the great democratic values on which the country was founded. (pp. 46-47)

Speaking from a social constructivist perspective, Kelle (1996) contended In Educating Tomorrow’s Valuable Citizen that education can be used to illuminate or indoctrinate. She suggested “active democratic citizenship is a focus today in name only” (p. 72). In fact, she believed that only through a “transformative education” that examined America’s

contradictions could a modern participatory democracy be possible. Examples of these powerful contradictions included: rights versus responsibility, capitalism versus equality, competition versus cooperation, authoritarianism versus liberty, conformity versus creativity and innovation, intellectualism versus activism, patriarchy versus freedom, and obedience versus vigilance. "If citizens and educators are not aware of these contradictions and do not grapple with them in and out of the classroom, as they do not now, the promise of democracy cannot be fulfilled" (Kelle, 1996, p. 71).

James Banks (1997), a multicultural educator, also declared that the structure of schools must be transformed in order for students to develop the knowledge, values, and skills needed to become effective citizens in a pluralistic and democratic society. He believed large segments of the population were not acquiring the knowledge and skills critically important to becoming thoughtful, compassionate, and reflective citizens.

In the aftermath of September 11, America's teachers and students, along with the rest of the world, have attempted to make sense of the recent terrorist events. Observers have suggested that a renewed commitment to patriotism, citizenship, and general democratic values have resulted from the events of September 11, 2001. In a November 19, 2001, issue of *The Nation*, Bill Moyers stated that the "soul of democracy has been dying. . . . But what's happened since the September 11 attacks would seem to put the lie to my fears. Americans have rallied together in a way that I cannot remember since World War II" (p. 11). Moyers went on to declare that this solidarity could be a new beginning, a "renewal of civic values that could leave our society stronger and more together than ever, working on common goals for the public good" (p.12).

Teachers reported that following September 11, 2001, America's students exhibited more interest in patriotism and citizenship and showed more compassion in social relationships. Students even initiated many of the acts of kindness that schools generated in response to the crisis (Zehr, 2001). "This event was so powerful and so immediate and so intense, kids just jumped at the chance to do something," stated Joe Nathan, the director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities (as cited in Zehr, 2001, p. 15). Yet, to what extent did this renewed interest in patriotism and citizenship reflect a thinly constructed artifact of emotion rather than a deep commitment to democratic principle?

Social critics, politicians, and educators from both ends of the political spectrum are calling for a reexamination of citizenship and democratic principles. In the 2002 article "Both Sides of the Classroom Door: After 9-11, the Many Facets of Teaching," Webeck, Black, Davis, and Field raised probing questions about the meaning of citizenship. They stated: "On and after 9/11, educators and citizens of all ages have been thrust into a compelling examination of what it means to be an American and what it means to be a citizen" (p. 8). Zimmerman (2001) proclaimed that the schools most important job is to "prepare our youngsters for citizenship." He believed that a "healthy democracy requires citizens who can think and deliberate about difficult public issues. In the wake of the attacks, then, teachers need to challenge their students with hard questions—not just to comfort them with easy answers" (p. 56).

Journalists, reporters, and writers across the nation stated numerous times that the events of September 11, 2001, will serve as a "traumatic and decisive turning point in the history of the United States" (Giroux, 2002, p. 1). Social theorist, Henry Giroux, believed these events may be a catalyst for addressing larger political issues that should invite critical examination of the citizen's role in a democratic society as well as the country's domestic and foreign policy. He contended that educators have an important role in encouraging such an investigation. Giroux suggested:

The events of September 11 provide educators with a crucial opportunity to reclaim schools as democratic public spheres in which students can engage in dialogue and critique around the meaning of democratic values, the relationship between learning and civic engagement and the connection between schooling, what it means to be a critical citizen, and the responsibilities one has to the larger world. . . .

Educators have an important role to play making their voices heard both in and outside of the classroom as part of an effort to articulate a vibrant and democratic notion of the social in a time of national crisis. Acting as public intellectuals, they can help create the conditions for debate and dialogue over the meaning of September 11 and what it might mean to rethink our nation's role in the world, address the dilemmas posed by the need to balance genuine security with democratic freedoms, and expand and deepen the possibilities of democracy itself. (pp. 4, 14)

In the face of this call for debate and dialog, Hibbing (2001) warned of anticipated difficulties and obstacles. For example, Americans have often perceived consensus around issues where opinions are actually divided. This misperception has created a climate of shadowed communication that hushes the voice of dissent. Many people interpreted the act of questioning the political status quo as a form of disloyalty. In "Following a Tragic Event: A Necessary Challenge for Civic Educators," Singleton (2001) added:

For teachers, the choice to engage students in a critical analysis of issues arising from tragic events can therefore be a difficult one. Yet if there is truly a deeper unity among Americans, it is in our shared commitment to core democratic values, which demand our willingness to engage in thoughtful examination and conversation about the most important issues faced. (p. 413)

In attempting to educate students to understand human predicaments, Nussbaum saw hopeful signs in the situation. In her article entitled "Can Patriotism be Compassionate?" written for the December 17, 2001, issue of the Nation, Nussbaum suggested that "we need to make sure these educational efforts are consistent and systematic, not just fear-motivated responses to an immediate crisis" (2001, p. 13). Giroux pursued this thought in another context. He felt it was critical that educators and scholars consider the events of September 11 "not through a one-sided view of patriotism that stifles dissent and aids the forces of domestic militarization but as part of a broader effort to expand the United States' democratic rather than repressive possibilities" (2002, p. 10). In fact, Giroux warned his readers that this newfound sense of national unity is often based on collective fears organized around "flag-waving displays of patriotism." (p. 1)

Shortly following the terrorist events, a position statement appeared on the website of the Center for Civic Education advocating that young people in our country understand the values and principles that united Americans on September 11, 2001. "Today more than ever . . . they need to know how our democracy works and how they can help sustain and improve it. Never has the vital civic mission of our schools been more important." Diane Ravitch, former assistant U.S. Secretary of Education and an educational historian, advocated that in light of the recent events, "what schools must do is teach young people the virtues and blessings of our democratic system of government. Our ability to defend what we hold dear depends on our knowledge and understanding of it." (2001, p. 48)

A National Council for the Social Studies (1997) position statement entitled "Fostering Civic Virtue" claimed: "The fostering of civic virtue is a critical task for our nation's schools . . . Civic virtue refers to . . . 'habits of the heart,' that is, a commitment to democratic principles and values that manifests itself in the everyday lives of citizens."

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, this position statement remains as current as the day it was penned. Educating students for democracy remains the first commitment of America's schools. The quality of that commitment will shape the quality of the republic into the 21st century.

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