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Educating Youth for Civic Life and Civic Virtue

Introduction

Paul Wangemann

Adults everywhere are responsible for the education of their children. Adults living in communities seek to promote a culture that reflects their common commitment to helping the young learn the necessities for success in their society. This often includes the community language, survival skills, and moral and religious values. John Dewey (1916) explained that a community sustains itself through “continuous self-renewal, and that this renewal takes place by means of the educational growth of the immature members of the group” (p. 10). Education has been a form of transmission, with its purposes largely determined by the adults of the society. Both formal and informal means of education contribute to developing young people’s capacities to participate well within their ethnic, geographic, social, religious, economic, and political groups.

In a democratic society, members are expected to participate in deliberations and communal decisions about how they as a people should live together; decide on dissemination, use, and control of power; and settle upon matters that are in the best interest or the common good among individuals with diverse interests and needs. Thus democracy is a challenging way of life, placing a high demand on education to help young people prepare for responsible citizenship in a free society.

The American form of democracy, sometimes referred to as a constitutional republic, was created based on principles, ideas, and ideals that have provided direction and guidance through periods of change and challenge. Understanding the rights and

responsibilities of democratic citizenship and exerting the courage and determination to maintain them are essential for the nation's survival. But additional qualities of character are often neglected in preparing today's youth for citizen participation: civic virtue, which includes willingness to obey the law of the land and to sacrifice individual interests for the greater good, and civic charity, which embraces genuine interest in the well-being of fellow citizens.

Tomorrow's citizens must be prepared: informally in their homes and communities as well as formally in public education systems. Public schools provide planned, deliberate, and intentional efforts to convey knowledge, develop skills, and promote dispositions that will lead children and youth to active participation and ethical choices necessary for sustaining the liberty of their heritage. We question how best to accomplish these goals, as well as where our strengths and weaknesses currently lie.

This site includes address and papers focused on aspects of education that influence preparation of youth for the American form of democratic life. Several strands of thought that characterize these contributions will be found woven throughout the various papers:

1. The American tradition of civic virtue and its role in preserving freedom in U.S. society
2. The role of public schools in helping young people prepare for active and engaged citizenship
3. Approaches to helping students develop an inner sense of the meaning of democracy, a desire to make wise personal choices, a harmonization of internal moral sensibilities with external purposes and behaviors, and a willingness to participate actively in society

Part 1: Education for Civic Life

Individuals are not born with the traits necessary to sustain a democratic way of life; these strengths must be acquired through education. Families, communities, religious congregations, public schools and institutions, and volunteer groups and agencies—as primary institutions of society—contribute significantly to the education of young people.. More than just knowledge and skills are required: citizens must possess a willingness to act and to care enough to get involved.

In Part 1, Daniel Robinson explores the lifelong requirement of education for a civic life. Paul Woodruff examines the role of compassion in the development of citizens capable of self-government. Terrance Olson explains philosophy and theory enhanced by practical examples involving lives of virtue and purpose. John Nagl illustrates this education process in his journey of development from a boy to a man.

Part 2: The American Tradition of Civic Virtue

The ideal of civic virtue suggests the need to be willing to sacrifice personal wants and interests to support the greater good of the whole. American tradition expects that citizens will voluntarily temper their personal demands and pursuits, exercising self-restraint and public mindedness when needed for liberty to flourish. This willingness requires character of its citizens, a product of both personal development and education.

Civic charity is a respectful and caring attitude toward all other members of the community (Holland, 2007), a natural affection for others that involves treating all with the respect and dignity required for free beings. Living together in a democratic society requires civic charity and civility to be felt and acted upon.

In Part 2 of this collection, Matthew Holland examines the role of charity in shaping the nature and direction of civil society. Gregory Clark compares the unity and collaboration required to create jazz with the necessity to work as one in a democratic society. David Mathews explores virtue as hard work.

Part 3: The Role of Public Schools in a Democratic Society

In addition to opportunities for learning, public schools can offer future citizens a form of “apprenticeship” in understanding and participating in democracy within a school culture. Public schools have been assigned some responsibility for preparing youth for citizenship, as currently they may be the only institution in the nation capable of reaching most children and youth for sustained periods of development, thus influencing development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions affecting citizenship. Due to the number and intensity of demands and expectations placed on public schools, little consensus exists on how to best promote civic knowledge and skills. Even less attention and agreement have affected the nurture and development of civic dispositions.

Preparation for civic responsibility cannot be achieved in a single course or addressed solely for a limited time period such as the junior high school years. It must be continuous, integrated, sustained, and meaningful for students at all grade levels. Educators need to be instructed on ways to integrate social and civic learning into academic curriculum. They need support and validation from the community for their efforts.

In Part 3 of this collection, Gary Fenstermacher compares two long-standing narratives of public education and makes the case indirectly for virtue and democratic schooling as he advises against supporting it in a political context. Gary Daynes examines as

he illustrates connections between local education and local democracy. Stacie Molner-Main looks at civic education in our public schools today.

Part 4: Developing Citizenry

To educate young people is to help them develop an inner sense of the meaning of democracy, a desire to make wise personal choices, a harmonization of internal moral sensibilities with external purposes and behaviors, and a willingness to participate actively in society.

Education essential to a democratic way of life involves developing internal as well external meaning for one's rights and responsibilities. The character of its citizens maintains and sustains a democratic society. Youth may need help to align their personal ambitions and values with those required for a harmonious democratic society in which all citizens' rights are protected and the people rule themselves in their own interests. If harmony is essential for democracy (Woodruff, p. 220), young people must be prepared to think deeply and explore their values and commitments to determine if they qualify as democratic citizens. Educators must help them embrace the responsibility to participate in self-governance on community and progressively higher levels.

In Part 4 of this collection, William Damon shares his research focused on understanding why many young people are not sufficiently motivated to become engaged in civic and political activity. Students are not finding the inspiration to get involved and the skills to engage effectively. John Rosenberg brings many concepts of this collection together in the context/metaphor of hospitality, proposing that to educate is to abide and that we must welcome others into a relationship of interactive sharing and caring.

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