

## Democracy Education

# Democratic Education to Reduce the Divide

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**We should laud the Partnership** for 21st Century Skills for highlighting civic literacy. Today, we have a much more robust understanding of what constitutes high-quality democratic education than we have ever had in the past, and this framework represents an opportunity for improving the civic and political literacy of our nation's youth. At the same time, we are witnessing an increasing “democracy divide” among young people based on educational quality and attainment. This divide presents a grave challenge to the very foundation of our democratic way of life. If left unchecked, it threatens to overwhelm the many positive elements of the Partnership's framework and other efforts at improving democratic education.

What constitutes robust and powerful democratic education is clear. Due to the hard work of teachers, researchers, and democratic education programs, we know more about the influence of various approaches to democratic education than we did in the past. *The Civic Mission of Schools* (CMS) report—compiled by a wide variety of stakeholders and interest groups, ranging from the Heritage Foundation to the American Civil Liberties Union—identified six research-based components that constitute “best practice” in democratic education: (1) instruction in important content; (2) discussions of current events and controversial issues; (3) service learning; (4) participation in extra-curricular activities that teach civic skills; (5) participation in school governance; and (6) simulations of democratic processes.<sup>1</sup>

Although the report does not delineate the precise content in component one that students should learn, there are two

ideas that seem particularly important based on my experiences as a teacher and researcher. First, students should study and deliberate the contested meaning of democracy. On both theoretical and practical levels, people disagree about what democracy does and should mean. However, the glory of the very concept of democracy rests in the reality that it has yielded great benefits in the past and has the potential to continue to do so in this new century. Consequently, the meaning of democracy deserves careful and systematic teaching, not mere sloganeering. The dynamism inherent in the concept of democracy explains why its meaning has changed over time and will continue to do so in the future, which is precisely why it is so important to invite young people into the conversation about what it should mean.

We also need to teach that a dynamic democracy is capable of both great progress and stunning defeats. We are very

good at teaching students about the admirable progress of our nation across time, such as scientific and technological discoveries, standard of living improvements, and the extension of political rights and educational opportunities. However, that history also includes a period when the federal government used the “rule of law” to deny suffrage to millions of people. Moreover, at some points in U.S. history, portions of the population actually *lost* civic and political privileges. Recall, too, that at one time in the United States, thousands upon thousands of people rallied around the concept of “workplace democracy”—a potential advance in democratic life that we hear little about today, when most people are at-will employees. Unfortunately, things do not always get better. Creating a national narrative of pure progress is disingenuous and, consequently, does young people no favors. Much of a democracy's policy work involves preventing conditions from getting worse. If people have the false belief that the nation always moves in a forward direction, they are not likely to act politically so as to prevent harm.

The developers of the framework of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills identified three important goals for civic literacy: “participating effectively in civic life through knowing how to stay informed and understanding government-



High school students work to get out the vote in a heavily Latino neighborhood of Boston as part of a class civics program, November 2, 2004. (AP Photo/Michael Dwyer)

tal processes”; “exercising the rights and obligations of citizenship at local, state, national and global levels”; and “understanding the local and global implications of civic decisions.” Although these objectives are reasonable and desirable aspirations for U.S. students, they are also potentially important for students in nations that are not democratic. And so, in light of democracy’s dynamism, as discussed above, and the demands of democracy in a globalized world, how can we evaluate the definition of civic literacy in the framework of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills? I suggest revisions to each of the goals.

First, we should expect students not only to participate effectively in “civic life,” to “stay informed,” and to “under-

stand governmental processes,” but also to “participate effectively in *political* life by staying informed *about events and issues that animate political decisions in their communities, understand the procedures and processes used to create and enforce political decisions, and influence those decisions.* This suggests three important revisions. It clarifies the difference between staying informed about popular news (the escapades of celebrities, for example) and keeping abreast of what is happening politically. In addition, it substitutes the more powerful concept of “political” participation for simple “civic” participation, which can easily be limited to volunteerism or “being a good neighbor.” Although the latter goals are important, they rarely result in the kind

of political movements and public policies that are needed to effectively solve problems. Finally, it emphasizes the need for action. Being informed but not doing anything with that knowledge creates a culture of bystanders, not enlightened and politically engaged citizens.

Second, it might be helpful to reverse the order of the locales mentioned in the next two recommendations: “exercising the rights and obligations of citizenship at local, state, national and global levels;” and “understanding the local and global implications of civic decisions.” That is, lead with “global” rather than local. The inclusion of global sends the message that the framework authors intended a vision of participation that extends well beyond national borders, which is vital for the

reasons that Merry Merryfield convincingly explains in her article in this issue.<sup>2</sup> We have ample evidence to suggest that people in the United States have a difficult time thinking of themselves as part of a global community. Perhaps, then, beginning instead of ending with global politics is in order. However, many democratic education experiences and courses also ignore the state and local, concentrating only on the national government. I am not therefore suggesting that we focus *only* on global concerns. Rather, we need to teach young people how to be political actors on multiple states: global, national, state, and local.

Armed with the findings of recent research and the vision of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, we know what to ask when we enter a school to find out whether or not students are learning what they need for democracy. Is there deep, rich, sustained, and rigorous content? Do students interrogate and deliberate about what democracy means? Does content focus on the contemporary world writ large, not just what is happening in our local communities, states, and the nation? Are students being taught the skills needed for a robust democracy? That is, can they write well? Can they construct an argument? Can they advocate for their interests in public and listen respectfully while others do the same? Do they have the courage to question, critique, and be critiqued? Can they forge common goals and shared plans out of disparate interests, needs, and dreams? Can they examine a community problem and think about how to solve it and, more importantly, think about how they can be part of the solution?

While it is good that the Partnership for 21st Century Skill's framework helps us ask these questions, in addition to the suggested revisions of the goals listed above, the framework's success also depends on bridging the "democracy divide." Much of the attention in our field concentrates on improving the quality and quantity of democratic education in K-12 schools. But it is also crucial to acknowledge that the impact of these

improvements cannot be felt by young people who have dropped out or been pushed out of the school system, or by students who are not given the opportunity to participate in the substantive forms of democratic education that many of their wealthier peers routinely experience. This is a serious, persistent, and growing "democracy divide" in the United States. Evidence suggests that young people with low educational attainment are not "aging into" political participation in the way many did in the past. On virtually every measure of political and civic activity (e.g., voting, attending meetings, buy/boycotting, paying attention to the news, or deliberating with others about public issues), young people who graduated from high school participate at a much higher level than those who did not, and the participation rate for those who attended college is higher still. During the 2008 presidential primary season, for example, one in four eligible young people with college experience voted on Super Tuesday, while only one in fourteen of the non-college youth did so.<sup>3</sup> Although the relationship between education and political participation is not a new story, never before has educational attainment been so predictive of whether young people will participate politically.

What should be done to reduce the democracy divide? Given the contribution of education to civic and political engagement, it is clear that changes are needed in schooling to reduce these disparities. We need to fight hard to make sure that all students—but especially poor students—are not shut out of democratic education. We know such disenfranchisement is happening in many schools, and we can't stand for it. We must argue that this exclusion is anti-democratic and dangerous. Recent and powerful evidence supports the claim that democratic education opportunities are meted out in a manner that privileges wealthier students, who are also more likely to be white. Most notably, a series of recent studies by Kahne and Middaugh (2008) have demonstrated

clearly that the elements of high quality democratic education recommended in the CMS report are much less likely to be experienced by students who are poor, African American, or Latino. As just one example, students in classes with higher average socio-economic status (SES) levels are 1.42 times more likely to report participating in debates or panel discussions in their social studies courses than students in lower SES classes.<sup>4</sup>

A 2007 study of the federally funded *We The People* program also illustrates the damage done by inequality in access to high quality democratic education.<sup>5</sup> Researchers compared students who participated in the *We The People* curriculum with those who did not. Statistically significant differences were found between what the *We the People* and high school comparison students learned with respect to important democratic knowledge (of topics such as democratic principles and constitutional limits on governmental institutes) and the development of civic skills. There is also solid evidence in this study to support the claim that this kind of program can have powerful effects on *all* students—not just those who have historically been provided the most high quality educational opportunities in democratic education. In this study, the *We the People* students scored significantly higher on most outcomes than comparison students *after* controlling for pre-survey scores, variations in classroom effects, ethnicity, and enrollment in an advanced civics/government or other social studies class. This is clearly good news.

But the bad news is that students are much more likely to have access to this program if they are white, in advanced classes, and have parents with more education (which is one marker of wealth). Moreover, the *We The People* teachers were different than the comparison teachers in key ways that likely enhanced their students' learning. These teachers were more likely to have had recent professional development in social studies, they taught more content about the Constitution, and used more high quality

instructional practices. Similar to what Kahne and Middaugh have found, we learn from this study that high quality teaching and learning opportunities are more likely to be meted out to students who are already on the privileged side of the democracy divide.

A number of changes are needed to address the democracy divide that so powerfully correlates with education. First, educators should be deeply concerned about the recent increase in the high school drop out/push out rate, an increase that is especially dramatic in urban schools. There are way too many young people on the wrong side of the schoolhouse gates. Most obviously, serious and sustained attention must be directed toward reducing this rate, given the powerful connection that exists between educational attainment and civic and political participation. We must recognize that effective dropout prevention programs *are* a form of democratic education, even if they focus more on academic achievement than democratic literacy.

Second, it is important to quit spending such a disproportionate share of the resources in the field on the youth who already are on the privileged side of the democracy divide (and who are most likely to attain high levels of education). We need a Marshall Plan for education in this country, but in the meantime we must triage the resources we have. Competitive programs such as the interschool mock trials and “We The People” Constitution program are often very powerful forms of democratic education, as the study I described above shows. However, relatively few urban schools participate in them. Additionally, in schools that sponsor such programs, they typically impact a small number of students. We need to work harder to open these events to more students, especially those who have not previously had the opportunity to participate. No longer can we afford to say we are doing a good job with democracy education in a school because a handful of students won a competition. Moreover, no longer should those of us who work

in and with organizations that run these competitions be let off the hook. Our standard needs to be quality *and* equality. High-quality programs that do not serve a broad cross-section of youth fail to meet that standard

Third, we need to recognize the consequences of tracking, particularly in arenas such as Advanced Placement (AP) government classes. Enrollment in these classes is increasing at a fast pace—a development that many applaud—and there are many exceptionally talented teachers who have created fabulous AP government courses. But the reality in many schools is that just as students are tracked, so, too, are teachers. One administrator recently told me that he had to make sure those who taught AP “really knew their stuff” because test scores depended on it, and powerful parents demanded it. Just as unfortunate as this kind of teacher tracking, which often rations the most experienced and capable teachers to those students who are routinely privileged in many schools, AP government classes rarely mirror the larger student body from which they are drawn. Policies and problems differentially impact diverse groups in the United States, and in democracy education, we should expose students to the differing views and experiences that exist in their schools. This is especially important in courses where the interchange between students demands different social positioning in order to be authentic and helpful. If AP government classes do not contain diversity of race and class, we may be thwarting the democratic process in the very place it could do the most good: social studies classrooms.

By looking carefully and critically at what is taught and to whom, we can better assess how to distribute effective forms of democratic education in equitable ways. Such an assessment serves as a democracy divide audit. We can use it to gauge whether we are standing on the right side of history as this nation approaches one of the most serious challenges it has ever faced: the disparate education that our youth are receiving.

We can own up to, investigate, and work to remediate this democracy divide or face its lasting, harmful effects. The effects are real, as illustrated by which sectors of U.S. society have influence on the political system, access to health care, and higher education. These effects undermine our democracy. They also challenge all of us in democratic education to concentrate our efforts on ensuring that all students have access to what we know enhances political and civic participation. While the goals for civic literacy in the Partnership for 21st Century Skills framework have drawn even more attention to democratic education, high-quality education that does not serve the goals of equality is really not high quality at all. 🌐

#### Notes

1. Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), *The Civic Mission of Schools* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003).
2. Merry Merryfield, “Scaffolding Social Studies for Global Awareness,” *Social Education* 72, no. 7 (2008).
3. For information about youth voting in the 2008 presidential primaries, see [www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_08\\_NH\\_FL.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_08_NH_FL.pdf).
4. Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, “Democracy for Some,” *CIRCLE Working Paper* 59 (2008): 16.
5. See the November 2007 Evaluation Report conducted by RMC Research Corporation of the *We The People* program of the Center for Civic Education. The Report can be accessed at [www.civiced.org/pdfs/research/wtpEvaluation121207.pdf](http://www.civiced.org/pdfs/research/wtpEvaluation121207.pdf).

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