Education as a civic right: Using schools to challenge the civic empowerment gap

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Perspectives on Critically Engaged Teaching and Race

In this series of related articles we present several alternatives to test-driven urban education "reforms"—alternatives that actively involve students in a critical analysis of their socially constructed environments, engaged discussions of race, and self-actualization. These essays hearken back to Twentieth Century theories of "critical pedagogy" championed by writers such as Paulo Freire and Bell Hooks. — the editors

Education as a Civic Right: Using Schools to Challenge the Civic Empowerment Gap

by Meira Levinson

Each semester I taught eighth-grade “Civics in Action” in the Boston Public Schools (BPS), students were required to take a standardized End-of-Course Assessment. One question asked them to select an issue “of importance to your school, your community, the country, the world and you.” Students were instructed to present the issue as a question, then answer the question from two different perspectives, offering at least three reasons in favor of each perspective. Finally, they were required to write an essay in favor of one of the positions they identified, supporting their thesis with evidence, details, and “a strong conclusion.” In June 2005, one of my students, whom I’ll call Jacquari (not his real name), submitted the following thoughtful and provocative response, which I have reproduced verbatim so as not to sugarcoat the challenges he faced in formal academic proficiency.

Should Boston build parks to reduce violence?

Yes they should build parks to reduce violence

No they shouldn’t build parks to reduce violence

One reason why they should is to keep the peace the second reason is to have a place for children and the third reason is to have a place where we can run free.

I reason why they shouldn’t is because there will be shoot outs. 2 reason is because people will be smoking and drinking in the park leaving trash behind them 3 reason is because gangs will be hanging out let [late] in the playground and be destroying it with spray paint.

I really think they should be then again they shouldn’t because when there are different gangs contacts the fight always be in parks and suppose that there are a whole bunch of little kids in the park and then there is a group of gang members standing or chilling the then they enemies

(Please turn to page 2)
come over and start shouting at
the others then some one lose
they kid over some one else for
nothing. Example when the girl
was trying to leave the park in
grove hall [a local housing de-
velopment] because of a gang then
as she was walking out the park
she got shot in the back and
died.

Jacquari's essay is hardly alarmist.
In the first six months of 2005,
twenty-four people had been murdered
in or near Jacquari's own poverty-
stricken and racially isolated neighbor-
hood of Dorchester.

My family and I live in Boston as
well, in the rapidly gentrifying and
increasingly White Jamaica Plain
neighborhood. (Whole Foods moved
in last year.) Jacquari and I are gov-
erned by the same mayor and city
council. Our neighborhoods even bor-
der the same park, the largest in the
city. But Jacquari's civic spaces are
fraught with fear, as mine are not.
When Jacquari passes an open space,
he sees room for turf wars between ri-
vral gangs. When I pass an open space,
I see room for a Frisbee game or a
picnic. In this respect, Jacquari's city
is not the same as my city. I don't see
what he sees; I don't live as he lives;
and no matter how imaginatively I try
to understand the world from others'
perspectives, my insights will never
match his own.

Despite the fact that Jacquari likely
never graduated from high school—he
probably never made it past freshman
year, given his abysmal academic skills
and history of retention—Boston would
be a better place if Jacquari were in-
volved in its governance. Dorchester
would be better off if Jacquari had the
knowledge, skills and commitment to
work with others to address the prob-
lems he identifies in his essay, as well
as the many other civic challenges he
told me about when he was my stu-

cient. Jacquari himself would be bet-
ter off if he could translate his anguish
into action—especially into civic ac-
tion in collaboration with others who
also want kids to be able to "run free"
in a park rather than watch for a gun at
their backs. Furthermore, Jacquari
would be better off if he could have
translated his knowledge of his own
academic weaknesses into empowered
engagement, into a declaration that his
own education was outrageous and
unjust. Jacquari deserved a real edu-
cation, one where a fifteen year-old
eighth-grader would have had the ca-
pacity to write flowing, compelling
sentences. He also deserved an education that would
enable him to exercise self-determina-
tion: individually, over his own life,
and collectively, in collaboration with
others, over the life of his community.

Because of Jacquari, and many
other students I taught over eight years
in the Atlanta and Boston Public
Schools prior to my becoming an edu-
cation professor, I have been commit-
ted in recent years to publicizing and
trying to combat the civic empower-
ment gap between low-income youth
and adults of color, on the one hand,
and White, middle-class and wealthy
youth and adults, on the other. This
gap is as large and as disturbing as the
academic achievement gaps that have received significant national attention
in recent years. It harms students and
their families, the communities in
which they live, and the nation as a
whole. But although we've had in-
controvertible evidence of the civic em-
powerment gap for decades, we have
done little to address it, even in the
racially and economically segre-
gated schools where so many young
people at the bottom of the gap spend
their time. By reforming our civically
misleading practices in these schools,
I suggest we can not only contribute
to the empowerment of a new gener-
ation, but also strengthen American de-
mocracy in the process.

Evidence of the Civic Empowerment Gap

The civic empowerment gap is per-
haps most visible in election data.
Despite enthusiasm about the power of
Latinos in the 2012 presidential elec-
tion and the increase in Black and
youth turnout in 2008, voting rates ex-
hibit huge and stubborn disparities.
In 2010, the most recent election for
which we have demographic data,
Black and White U.S. citizens ages 18-
29 were 40-50% more likely to vote
than their Hispanic and Asian peers.
(Note that all of these data are about
citizens, so immigration status is not
a factor.) Young people with some
college experience, furthermore, were
more than twice as likely to have voted
as those with no college experience.
These patterns exactly replicate those
of older adults, where again Black and
White, middle-class and college-edu-
cated citizens outvote Hispanic and
Asian, poor and non-college attenders
by up to a 2.5:1 margin. The fact that
these were mid-term elections does not
seem to have been a factor: Voting
rates in the 2008 and 2004 presiden-
tial elections betrayed identical patterns
(U.S. Census Bureau 2010, Table 4b).

Reliable analyses of political par-
ticipation, as measured by membership
in political parties, campaign dona-
tions, campaign volunteering, par-
The increasing interest in school diversity in places like New York City is driven by historic demographic shifts in cities and suburbs and by a growing awareness that the United States will be majority minority within the next 30 years. Although they will not lead the movement, charter schools that value integration over isolated “diversity” can play a supporting role by collaborating with public schools that share the same goal.

The civic empowerment gap is therefore no more natural or inevitable than the academic achievement gap is.

Furthermore, the sizable gap in individuals’ sense of efficacy—their beliefs that they themselves can make a difference and influence others, including those in government—is a major concern. The less efficacious one feels, the less likely one is to participate. Efficacy is also significantly correlated with both race/ethnicity and class (Verba et al. 1995, Table 12.14). This gap is understandable. As a White, well-educated, middle-class woman with extensive political and social capital, for example, I undeniably do have more opportunities to influence government or public policy than did my non-White, educationally underserved, economically disadvantaged, often limited English proficient students living in neighborhoods with limited social and political capital (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005; Bartels 2008). But the efficacy gap is also viciously self-reinforcing, if those who correctly view themselves as more able to make a difference get ever more involved, while those who question their efficacy withdraw from public civic engagement. Similar concerns beset disparities in civic identity and civic duty, which figure importantly in influencing the character and quality of civic engagement (Kinder 1998).

Why the Civic Empowerment Gap Matters

Although these civic empowerment gaps are common knowledge, they tend to be explained away in the same way the academic achievement gap was a decade ago: “But of course poor people [or Hispanics, etc.] participate less. They don’t have the time or financial resources (or education, knowledge, ...) to participate as wealthier people do.” Such arguments are as inimical to democracy as were those arguments justifying the academic achievement gap. They also make little sense when examined on a global scale. Consider the millions of courageous protesters, many from distinctly lower-class communities, who have participated in the “Arab Spring” uprisings. Or examine voter turn-out rates internationally, which reveal about a 10 percentage point difference between the most- and least-educated citizens and between the wealthiest and poorest citizens. This is far eclipsed by the United States’ 25-35 percentage point gap (Lijphart 1997, 3; Jaime-Castillo 2009). It is also important to recognize that the participation gap has not even always been a major feature of U.S. civic and political life. In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, immigrant incorporation groups, trade unions, fraternal organizations, and
political parties regularly mobilized poor, working-class, non-White and newly immigrant Americans, and participation in civic organizations especially was extremely widespread (Montgomery 1993, 2001; Skocpol 1999; Skocpol, et al. 2000). The civic empowerment gap is therefore no more natural or inevitable than the academic achievement gap is. Virtually all Americans now accept (in theory, at least) that we have a national responsibility to provide adequate academic education to all children, and we claim (in theory, at least) that all children can achieve academically. We must reach the same conclusions about our nation’s, and hence every school’s, obligation to help all children achieve civic empowerment. Public schools were founded in the United States for civic purposes. We must hold schools to account—and hold ourselves to account—for achieving civic outcomes for all children that are as high quality as the academic outcomes we now claim to expect.

Democratic governance relies on participatory citizens for its legitimacy and stability. Furthermore, democratic deliberations and decisions are likely to be of lower quality if people representing only a fairly narrow range of experiences, interests and backgrounds are involved. Part of the beauty of democracy, when it functions effectively and inclusively, is its ability to create aggregate wisdom and good judgment from individual citizens’ necessarily limited knowledge, skills and viewpoints. To exclude citizens from this process is to diminish the wisdom that the collectivity may create.

What Should Be Done

One important battleground for attacking the civic empowerment gap is the network of mostly urban schools serving a de facto segregated, poor and minority student population. To start with, we need to commit to improving urban schools and reducing the dropout rate, which reaches nearly fifty percent in some urban districts. If urban schools were better, and if more students stayed in higher-quality schools and graduated, then the demographic divide in this country would narrow, and the civic empowerment gap would narrow along with it.

We also need to restore civic education to the curriculum. The decline in the number, range and frequency of civics courses offered in US elementary and high schools must be reversed. There is ample evidence that civic education improves civic outcomes, but resources devoted to it have dropped markedly over the past thirty or forty years—especially in schools serving minority students. This approach makes no sense. Consider that we require students to take English and math every semester of every year of elementary and secondary school because mastery takes time and practice. If we want students to become masterful citizens, then the same expectations should apply. Civic education must begin in elementary schools and be a regular part of education K-12 and beyond.

Old-school “civics,” however, isn’t going to shrink the civic empowerment gap on its own. Civics is usually taken to cover the three branches of government, “how a bill becomes a law,” and other formal institutional mechanisms of a functional and essentially fair and democratic system. Civics classes that emphasize the processes of government, “how a bill becomes a law,” and other formal institutional structures demonstrating how government works. Many students and others at the “bottom” of the civic empowerment gap, however, think that government doesn’t work—at least for them or anyone they know—and they may well be justified in this belief. Civics classes that emphasize the mechanisms of a functional and essentially fair and democratic system will thus be rejected as irrelevant or worse by those to whom educators are most responsible for helping to empower. So we need to take another approach. Schools need to take seriously the knowledge and experiences of low-income youth and adults of color—to teach in ways that are con-
sonant with and that even build upon their knowledge and experience—while doing so in a way that is engaging and empowering rather than disaffecting and disempowering.

One important way to do this is by teaching historical counternarratives instead of the moderately triumphalist narrative about U.S. history taught in most schools. Students are often exhorted to “get involved” because of how great the country is and how pure are its ideals. Instead, students can learn about the collective struggles that millions of Americans have engaged in to create opportunities for others. It then becomes students’ obligation to take on this mantle of struggle in order to consolidate these hard-won gains and to open further opportunities to others. This kind of teaching requires a shift from extraordinary heroes, whether Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, to ordinary role models. To the extent that students learn to gaze upon others’ heroic visages, they fail to learn and be moved to engage civically themselves. Education for civic empowerment necessitates a shift from distant heroes and their accomplishments to more ordinary role models and their specific techniques of civic engagement, especially of collective action.

At the same time as we change how students learn about citizenship in settings such as history class, we must also change students’ opportunities to learn through citizenship in the school as a whole. Schools are themselves civil societies, for good and ill; as such, they exert a profound effect on students’ and adults’ civic experiences, identities and opportunities—even when they have no intention of doing so. If we want young people to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and habits of empowered citizens, they must be given the opportunity on a regular basis to practice being citizens. Such opportunities are shockingly rare especially in urban schools serving predominantly low-income students of color. Civic disrespect, compelled silence and zero tolerance policies for any perceived deviance are often the order of the day. But classrooms and schools can be reformed, so that an open, mutually respectful culture and climate is established in which students feel not only free but even expected to speak up and share their perspectives on important matters affecting the school, local, regional and even global community.

Perhaps most importantly, adults, other elites and youth themselves will come to recognize and value the civic contributions that young people—especially low-income youth of color—can make only when these young people

References


are given the opportunities to make a visible and effective difference in the world beyond the school. “Action civics” enables students to do civics and behave as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action and reflection about problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action. Organizations around the country are partnering with urban schools and districts to provide students such opportunities, including Mikva Challenge, Public Achievement, Generation Citizen, Youth on Board, and Earth Force. These initiatives are also supported by the National Action Civics Collaborative, which is beginning to train additional teachers, policy makers, and district leaders in action civics.

Moving Forward

Public schools have always been charged with the responsibility of making Americans, and hence, of (re)making America. The decisions we make about how to educate our and others’ children are at their heart decisions about how we conceive of the world we live in now and how to create the world we want to inhabit in the future. I argue that solving the civic empowerment gap is a central responsibility of schools (and other public institutions); it is a necessary precondition of our claim to be a democratic nation. But the task is not without danger. It risks exposing fissures in our national identity and democracy that many people would rather keep under wraps. It also risks upending our collective understanding of who we are, both empirically and aspirationally—including by revealing that no such collective understanding exists. We must confront these risks clearly—headedly and honestly if schools are truly to tackle the civic empowerment gap in a meaningful way.

Notwithstanding both the challenges and even the dangers, the pursuit of democratic equality and legitimacy is a laudable and necessary goal. As schools put these reforms into place, they will provide students and teachers with a set of powerful civic experiences that are likely to increase their efficacy and engagement, and hence to inspire their acquisition of civic knowledge and skills as well as continued productive participation. In doing so, schools will also help strengthen local communities and the nation as a whole, both via the direct work that students accomplish and by building a new generation of mobilized, empowered adults.

Reducing the civic empowerment gap also strengthens democracy. It broadens government’s representativeness, increases its responsiveness to diverse individuals and communities, and thereby also reinforces its political legitimacy in the eyes of historically disenfranchised community members. It strengthens schools, as students turn their attention to solving problems collaboratively as opposed to fighting against the system or just checking out. And finally, it promotes civic and political equality and fairness—ideals that are central to our American democracy. These are goals that all schools—and all citizens—can and should embrace.

(MINDFULNESS: Cont. from page 7)

It would need more of a data/science explanation front-ended and may be a longer process to build buy-in in the group.

Kat: I’m a yoga and meditation practitioner. And, even for me, initially, there was a little of me that felt a little angry for the sake of being resistant. [laughing] I’m not sure why that came out of me. I was frustrated perhaps that a lot of the stuff in [the social context of education class] was an overlap from undergrad and there wasn’t any time to focus on what do we do with that. So I thought, alright! Here’s a literacy course, here we go with methods. And then, oh my gosh, here we go again with schools and society and racism. But then, with the practices of meditation and truly listening, we started to articulate voices of dissensions, democratic discourse, and it wasn’t combative for the sake of it, but deepening the conversations. I could see the transformation in myself from one extreme to the other. There was something in the process of community-building that was transformative.

Dan: We came in looking for something very specific. We came out with Teflon minds, able to let the distractions of separation slide off of us.

The way forward is both together and mindful.

Although it was not in the explicit design, the practices of meditation and being intentional with each other started to chip away at one of the core requirements of an oppressive society: that we are separate and in competition with each other. The Donovan cohort and all of the authors of this article represent a variety of standpoints in society: young adult, middle-aged, white, people of color, varying sexual identities, varying abled, etc. What the method of being mindful afforded us was a chance to touch stone to our core humanity, to be in our bodies and to be present so that we could engage even more wholeheartedly in our collective learning. We also share these practices with some trepidation, particularly to the field of education, which knows how to homogenize and flatten almost any vibrant practice. In a sense, schools come by this honestly, as they are modeled after factories. In the desire to “scale up,” though, we have to remain vigilant about not reducing and removing the human element to teaching. At its core, teaching and learning as well as social movements are relational activities. Perhaps the only proven method for being in a generative relationship for the social good is to be mindfully human and humanizing.

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