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No Child Left Thinking

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If students from a totalitarian nation were secretly transported to an American classroom to continue their lessons with new teachers and a new curriculum, would they be able to tell the difference? I do not ask this question facetiously. It seems plausible, for example, that a good lesson in multiplication, chemistry, or a foreign language might seem equally at home in many parts of the world. So what would be different about teaching and learning in your local schools than in the schools of a country governed by a one-ruling-party dictatorship? Do students in the United States learn how to participate as democratic citizens in decisions that affect all our lives?

Most of us would like to believe that they do. While a school in North Korea or China might be teaching students blind allegiance to their nation's leaders and deference to the social and political policies those leaders enact, we would expect that schools in the United States would teach students the skills and dispositions needed to evaluate for themselves the benefits and drawbacks of particular policies and government practices.

We would not be surprised to learn, for example, that North Korean children are taught to abide by an “official history” handed down by the single-party authoritarian regime. After all, a school curriculum that teaches one

unified, unquestioned version of “truth” is one of the hallmarks of totalitarian societies. Democratic citizens, on the other hand, are committed to the people, principles, and values that underlie democracy—such as political participation, free speech, civil liberties, and social equal-

ity. Schools might develop these commitments through lessons in the skills of analysis and exploration, free political expression, and independent thought. And U.S. schools often support democratic dispositions in just such ways.

But teaching and learning do not always conform to democratic goals and ideals. Tensions abound, and in recent years some of the very foundations of democratic en-

gagement such as opportunities for independent thinking and critical analysis have become less and less common. If being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social assumptions, then that foundation of citizenship is at odds with recent trends in education policy.

I run a research collaborative called Democratic Dialogue. The teachers, students, and university researchers associated with Democratic Dialogue are all interested in the role schooling plays in strengthening democratic societies. We conduct studies to investigate the many different ways schools are fulfilling (or not fulfilling) their historic

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democratic mission to foster an educated citizenry, capable of informed engagement in civic and political life. These studies indicate a clear and troubling trend: much of current education reform is limiting the ways teachers can develop the kinds of attitudes, skills, knowledge, and habits necessary for a democratic society to flourish. Indeed, the goals of K-12 education have been shifting steadily away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and towards more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain.

Pressures from parents, school boards, and a broad cultural shift in educational priorities have resulted in schools

across the country being seen primarily as conduits for individual success, and, increasingly, lessons aimed at exploring democratic responsibilities have been crowded out.

In many school districts, ever narrower curriculum frameworks emphasize preparing students for standardized assessments in math and literacy at the same time that they shortchange the social studies, history, and citizenship education. Moreover, there is a “democratic divide” in which higher achieving students, generally from wealthier neighborhoods, are receiving a disproportionate share of the kinds of citizenship education that sharpen students’ thinking about issues of public debate and concern.

Curricular approaches that spoon-feed students to succeed on narrow academic tests teach students that broader critical thinking is optional. The pedagogical challenge of how to foster thoughtful consideration and analysis of contemporary problems has all too often been replaced by the single-minded drive to make students better test-takers, rather than better citizens.

Outlawing Critical Thinking

The high-stakes testing mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation has further pushed to the margins educational efforts that challenge students to grapple with tough questions about society and the world. In a study by the Center on Education Policy, 71 percent of districts reported cutting back on time for other subjects—social studies in particular—to make more space for reading and math instruction (Renter, 2006). Similarly, research by the Washington-based group Common Core found that two-thirds of public school teachers surveyed report that disciplines such as science, social studies, and art are crowded out of the school day as a direct result of state testing policies (Common Core, 2012). In testimony before the U.S. Senate, historian David McCullough noted that, because of NCLB, “history is being put on the back burner or taken off the stove altogether in many or most schools,” (Dillion, 2006). An increasing number of students are getting little to no education about how government works, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the evolution of social movements, and U.S. and world history. As Peter Campbell, Missouri State Coordinator for FairTest, noted,

The sociopolitical implications of poor black and Hispanic children not learning about the Civil Rights movement, not learning about women’s suffrage, not learning about the U.S. Civil War, and not learning about any historical or contemporary instance of civil disobedience is more than just chilling. It smacks of an Orwellian attempt not merely to re-write history, but to get rid of it. (Campbell, 2006).

The implications Campbell describes are not limited to poor Black and Hispanic students. Any student being

denied knowledge about historical events and social movements misses out on important opportunities to link his or her education to the quintessentially democratic struggles for a better society for all.

I focus on history teaching here, but the trend is not limited to social studies. In many states, virtually every subject area is under scrutiny for any deviation from one single narrative, based on knowable, testable, and purportedly uncontested facts. An English teacher, in a study undertaken by my research team, told us that even novel reading was now prescriptive in her state’s rubric: meanings predetermined, vocabulary words preselected, and essay topics predigested. A science teacher put it this way: “The only part of the science curriculum now being critically analyzed is evolution,” (Westheimer, 2008).

As bad as that sounds, omitting lessons that might develop critical thinking skills is still different from outlawing them. But in the book *Pledging Allegiance: The Politics of Patriotism in America’s Schools*, I detailed the ways in which schools, districts, states, and even the federal government—in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks—began to implement policies that actually *restrict* critical analysis of historical and contemporary events in the school curriculum, (Westheimer, 2007). In the worst-case examples, teachers were suspended or fired for teaching lessons on critical analysis of the news or of textbooks, and students were suspended for expressing dissenting opinions on the war in Iraq, organizing “peace clubs,” or wearing T-shirts with antiwar quotations. Students and a drama teacher in a Connecticut high school spent months researching, writing, and rehearsing a play they wrote about the Iraq war entitled *Voices in Conflict*. The school administration banned the play on the basis that it was “inappropriate.” (In this case, the students went on to perform the play in the spring of 2007 on an off-Broadway stage in New York to impressive critical review.) But efforts to “protect” students from multiple perspectives on historical and contemporary events were not limited to individual cases. State and federal policy followed this trend as well.

In 2003, Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander introduced his bill, The American History and Civics Education Act, by warning that educators should not expose students

to competing ideas in historical texts. Civics, he argued, should be put back in its “rightful place in our schools, so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American,” (Alexander, 2003). (For Alexander, what it means to be an American is more *answer* than *question*, it seems.) In April 2008, the Arizona House of Representatives passed SB 1108 specifying that schools whose teachings “denigrate or encourage dissent” from “American values” would lose state funding.¹ More recently, in 2012, the Texas Republican Party platform briefly included language that asserted opposition to “the teaching of critical thinking skills” or lessons that “have the purpose of challenging the student’s fixed beliefs.”

A more worrisome example, however, comes from

Florida. In June 2006, the Florida Education Omnibus Bill included language specifying that “the history of the United States shall be taught as genuine history.... American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable,” (Arizona, 2008). The stated goal of the bill’s designers was “to raise historical literacy” with a particular emphasis on the “teaching of facts.” For example, the bill requires that only facts be taught when it comes to discussing the “period of discovery” and the early colonies. This led Florida State Representative Shelley Vana, who also served as the West Palm Beach teachers union president, to wonder just “whose facts would they be, Christopher Columbus’s or the Indians’?” (Dolinsky, 2006). Florida thus became the first state I know of to ban historical interpretation in public schools, thereby effectively outlawing critical thinking.

Of course, professional historians almost universally regard history as exactly a matter of interpretation; indeed, the competing interpretations are what make history so

interesting. Historians and educators alike widely derided the mandated adherence to an official story embodied in the Florida legislation, but the impact of such mandates should not be underestimated. The bill and other similar legislative examples of restricting history lessons to one “true” narrative remain on the books in Florida, Nebraska, Kansas, and other states.

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More recently, in the fall of 2014, more than a thousand Jefferson County, Colorado high school students and hundreds of teachers walked out of classes to protest the school board’s efforts to promote “positive” American history and downplay the legacy of civil disobedience and protest. The protests came in the wake of a proposal by the school board to make changes to the Advanced Placement (AP) history

curriculum. AP history, the board suggested “should promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system, respect for authority and respect for individual rights. Materials should not encourage or condone civil disorder, social strife or disregard for the law,” (Glenza, 2014). Responding to the school board’s proposal, both teachers and students in Jefferson County boycotted classes, with teachers calling in sick, and students staging a variety of protests outside of schools. One Jefferson County teacher characterized the board’s proposal as “an attack on teachers and public education, and a disregard for the needs of our students.... It’s really, really scary to be a teacher in Jefferson County right now,” (Glenza, 2014) while a high school senior, highlighting the irony of students protesting a curriculum that discourages protesting, vowed: “If they don’t teach us civil disobedience, we will teach ourselves,” (Jacobs, 2014).

There is a certain irony, evident in the above examples, to the argument that schools in a democratic nation can bet-

ter prepare students to be democratic citizens by encouraging deference to authority and discouraging lessons about social movements and social change. Reporting on the Colorado protests, *U.S. News and World Report* may have best captured the sentiments of outraged teachers, parents, and students when they wrote that the Jefferson County proposal “isn’t about making better citizens. It’s about removing the very idea behind good citizenship—the very American premise that we choose our leaders, hold them accountable, demonstrate peacefully to make our views known and to question authority,” (Milligan, 2014).

At this point, some readers might be thinking that conditions seem restrictive and antidemocratic for students in the public schools, but that, on the whole, many private schools prepare students for a democratic society by offering a broad liberal education that asks students to grapple with difficult and contested policy issues. Evidence indicates otherwise. As the goals for K 12 public education have shifted away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and toward more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain, private schools have, in many ways, led the pack. Pressures from parents, board members, and a broad cultural shift in educational priorities have resulted in schools across the country being seen primarily as conduits for individual success, and lessons aimed at exploring democratic responsibilities have increasingly been crowded out. A steadily growing body of research in the United States now echoes what Tony Hubbard, former director of the United Kingdom’s Independent Schools Inspectorate, stated most plainly after reviewing data from an extensive study of British independent schools: Because of the immense pressure to achieve high academic results on exams and elevate schools’ prestigious college-entrance rates,

“For democracy to remain vibrant, educators must convey to students that both critical thinking and action are important components of democratic civic life – and students must learn that they have important contributions to make.”

independent schools are “overdirected” so that students do not have “sufficient opportunity or incentive to think for themselves.” Increasingly following formulas that “spoon-feed” students to succeed on narrow academic tests, independent schools, Hubbard warned, “teach students not to think.” (BBC, 2002).

Although the overt examples I’ve described above that seek to ban critical thinking from classrooms are worrisome, the more insidious developments come from an education-reform movement that makes those efforts unnecessary. So many schools have now become myopically focused on efficiency and accountability that there are simply fewer and fewer opportunities for deeper consideration of important ideas. The relentless focus on testing and “achievement”

means that time for in-depth critical analysis of ideas has been diminished. Social studies scholar Stephen Thornton notes that, by critical thinking, school officials too often mean that students should passively absorb as truth, the thinking already completed by someone else (Thornton, 2005). Current school reform policies and many classroom practices too often reduce teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to make principled stands that have long been associated with democracy. The hidden curriculum of post-NCLB classrooms became how to please authority and pass the tests, not how to develop convictions and stand up for them.

What Kind of Citizen?

All is not bleak when it comes to educating for democratic understanding and participation. Many teachers across the country conduct excellent educational activities concerned with helping students become active and effective citizens (see sidebar).

But even when educators are expressly committed to teaching “good citizenship,” there is cause for caution. My colleague Dr. Joseph Kahne, Mills College, California, and I spent the better part of a decade studying programs that aimed to develop good citizenship skills among youth and young adults. In study after study, we come to similar conclusions: the kinds of goals and practices commonly represented in curricula that hope to foster democratic citizenship usually have more to do with voluntarism, charity, and obedience than with democracy. In other words, “good citizenship” to many educators means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen—not grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions that every citizen in a democratic society needs to understand.

In our studies of dozens of programs, we identified three visions of “good” citizens that help capture the lay of the land when it comes to citizenship education: the Personally Responsible Citizen; the Participatory Citizen; and the Social Justice Oriented Citizen. These three visions can serve as a helpful guide to the variety of assumptions that fall under the idea of citizenship education. As Table 1 illustrates, they also lead to very different program decisions.

Personally Responsible Citizens contribute to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteer to help those less fortunate whether in a soup kitchen or a senior center. They might contribute time, money, or both to charitable causes. Both those in the character education movement and those who advocate community service would emphasize this vision of good citizenship. They seek to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work. Or they

nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer community service.

Participatory Citizens participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national levels. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government and other institutions (eg. community based organizations, churches) work and about the importance of planning and participating in organized

efforts to care for those in need, for example, or in efforts to guide school policies. While the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive.

Social-Justice Oriented Citizens know how to critically assess multiple perspectives. They can examine social, political, and economic structures and explore strategies for change that address root causes of problems. These

are the critical thinkers, and this vision of citizenship is the least commonly pursued in schools. We called this kind of citizen the Social-Justice Oriented Citizen because these programs emphasize the need for citizens to be able to think about issues of fairness, equality of opportunity, and democratic engagement. They share with the participatory citizen an emphasis on collective work related to the life and issues of the community.

However, Social-Justice Oriented Citizens make independent thinking a priority and encourage students to look for ways to improve society, and become thoughtfully informed about a variety of complex social issues. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about ways to effect systemic change. If Participa-

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Table 1. Kinds of Citizens

	Personally Responsible Citizen	Participatory Citizen	Social-Justive Oriented Citizen
DESCRIPTION	<p>Acts responsibly in their community</p> <p>Works and pays taxes</p> <p>Picks up litter, recycles, and gives blood</p> <p>Helps those in need, lends a hand during times of crisis</p>	<p>Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts</p> <p>Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment</p> <p>Knows how government agencies work</p> <p>Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks</p>	<p>Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures</p> <p>Explores strategies for change that address root causes of problems</p> <p>Knows about social movements and how to effect systematic change</p> <p>Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice</p>
SIMPLE ACTION	<p>Contributes food to a food drive</p>	<p>Helps to organize a food drive</p>	<p>Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes</p>
CORE ASSUMPTIONS	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community</p>	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures</p>	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question and change established systems and structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time</p>

From: Westheimer, J. & Kahne, J. (2004). *What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. American Educational Research Journal. 41(2), 237-269.*

tory Citizens are organizing the food drive and Personally Responsible Citizens are donating food, the Social Justice Oriented Citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.

Currently, the vast majority of school programs that take the time to teach citizenship emphasize either good character—including the importance of volunteering and helping those in need—or technical knowledge of legislatures and how government works. Far less common are schools that teach students to think about root causes of injustice or challenge existing social, economic, and political norms as a way to strengthen democracy.

Voluntarism and kindness can be used to avoid much thinking about politics and policy altogether. If that's the case, then in terms of democratic citizenship, these programs are highly limited. Character traits such as honesty,

integrity, and responsibility for one's actions are certainly valuable for becoming good neighbors and citizens. But, on their own, these traits are not about democracy. A growing number of educators and policymakers promote voluntarism and charity as an alternative to social policy and organized government action.

Former U.S. President George Bush Sr. famously promoted community service activities for youth by imagining a “thousand points of light” representing charitable efforts to respond to those in need. But if young people understand these actions as a kind of noblesse oblige—a private act of kindness performed by the privileged and fail to examine the deeper structural causes of social ills, then the thousand points of light risk becoming a thousand points of the status quo. Citizenship in a democratic community requires more than kindness and decency.



Democratic Educational Goals

Recall my opening question: If students from a totalitarian nation were secretly transported to a U.S. classroom, would they be able to tell the difference? Both classes might engage students in volunteer activities in the community—picking up litter from a nearby park perhaps or helping out at a busy intersection near a school or an old-age center. Government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship: don't do drugs; show up to work on time; give blood; help others during a flood; recycle; etc. These

are desirable traits for people living in any community. But they are not about democratic citizenship. In fact

“The hidden curriculum of post-NCLB classrooms became how to please authority and pass the tests, not how to develop convictions and stand up for them.”

some conceptions of personal responsibility—obedience and loyalty, for example—may work against the kind of independent thinking that effective democracy requires.

For more than two centuries, democracy in the United States has been predicated on citizens' informed engagement in civic and political life and schools have been seen as essential to support the development of

such citizens. “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves,” Thomas Jefferson famously wrote, adding that if the people are “not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a whole-

some discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.” Belief in the fundamental importance of education for democracy has been long-standing. And yet these beliefs are at risk in schools today. For democracy to remain vibrant, educators must convey to students that both critical thinking and action are important components of democratic civic life—and students must learn that they have important contributions to make. Democracy is not a spectator sport. The exit of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, dedicated to a critical history of war, bears the following inscription:

History is yours to make. It is not owned or written by someone else for you to learn....History is not just the story you read. It is the one you write. It is the one you remember or denounce or relate to others. It is not predetermined. Every action, every decision, however small, is relevant to its course. History is filled with horror and replete with hope. You shape the balance.

I suspect many readers could imagine a lesson in democracy by beginning a discussion with just such a quotation.

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¹ That bill died on the senate floor but had it passed, schools would have been required to surrender teaching materials to the state superintendent of public instruction, who then could have withheld state aid.



Evaluating educators has been an integral part of the field for over a century. But increasingly, debate about the rigor of those evaluations, their general value for teachers’ professional development and growth, and their implications for the less instructionally proficient has arisen. This latter issue has gained momentum over the past decade as recommendations for the scope and criteria of those evaluations have evolved. Considerable focus upon evaluations is tied to concerns that there exists a disproportionately high percentage of faculty being awarded tenure and exemplary annual ratings. The worthiness of the entire process as

well as some of the recipients has been questioned, especially in districts where student achievement is deemed to be seriously lagging. Consequently, it is being increasingly argued that so-called “high quality” teachers can be determined, in considerable part, by student assessment results, often state standardized test scores. From there, it is a short walk to claims that poor performing students, often in inner-city districts, could approximate their better performing suburban counterparts if only high quality educators were identified or cultivated through rigorous personnel actions. In fact, carried to its illogical conclusion, claims have