

Teaching Patriotism in America's Public Schools;
Policy, Practices, and Debates

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1. Introduction

Public education performs various services and functions for the state in all societies and cultures. Although cognitive skills are relatively easy for educational administrators and policy makers to measure and compare both domestically and internationally, the affective domain in education is often less studied and compared because of the difficulty in measuring and comparing attitudes, feelings and emotions that pervade the affective domain of children's psychic.

Socialization, acculturation, and education for citizenship are vital educational outcomes necessary in every country to help maintain social continuity and stability. Primarily through the affective domain schools provide the core foundation of values and beliefs that lead to a fostering of love, respect, and loyalty to one's country. In a multi-cultural society like the United States, educating young people to function in an individually competitive "free-market" society while maintaining a common core of set values that promote social unity has been the 'hidden agenda' or dual task of America's public schools.

2. Background and relevance of this paper.

Students in my junior and senior seminar on American Culture at Matsuyama University read and discuss the latest social issues and cultural trends in the United States. The format of the two-year seminar is not entirely comparative in nature. However, it is only natural when studying another culture to use your native culture as a base, but hopefully not in an ethnocentric manner. Since Japan is a much more homogenous culture than America, quite often my students struggle with the key issues of 'cultural pluralism' and 'cultural cohesion.' Since patriotism is a much more subtle and sensitive topic in Japan, my students often wonder why Americans openly display patriotic feelings at athletic and cultural events. This paper is a partial attempt to answer my students' interesting questions and help them better current trends and issues in the United States.

Immediately after the tragic events that happened in the United States on September 11, 2001, the world witnessed a spontaneous display of public patriotism in one of America's darkest hours. The purpose of this paper is to document how patriotism is taught in America's public schools. The underlying purpose is to analyze the philosophical debate that continues to rage over the role schools play in teaching patriotism. Through a review of the literature this essay will also expose and critic the two schools of thought that dominate the philosophical debate regarding education and patriotism.

3. Definitions.

Patriotism as defined by most dictionaries is love of and/or devotion to one's country. The original word in English comes from the Greek word, *patris*, which means fatherland. According to scholar Peter Euben, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates believed that patriotism did not require blind allegiance to everything the state does. This key point strikes at the core of the philosophical debate of the definition of patriotism in post 9/11 culture in American society. Patriotism requires some form of love, devotion, and loyalty to one's country (Fox, 2007). The key question here is, how does one define loyalty ?

In his analysis of 'new patriotism' (post-9/11) Joel Westheimer's article in Phi Delta Kappan (2006) views the philosophical debate surrounding patriotism into two schisms defined as : Authoritarian Patriotism and Democratic Patriotism, (p. 610). He equates 'authoritarian patriotism' with blind loyalty or unquestioning loyalty. This type of patriotism is very emotional and psychological which can easily lead to jingoistic sentiments and nationalism. The other portion of the patriotic schism defined by Westheimer is : Democratic Patriotism. The underlying principle to this type of patriotism holds that citizens have "the right to criticize their government, the right to hold unpopular beliefs, the right to protest, the right to independent thought." This type of patriotism is based on the concepts of critical thinking, questioning, liberty, and even dissent. These two underlying interpretations of patriotism are the defining differences in the continuing debate on how to teach patriotism in American's public schools.

4. Patriotic Symbols, Songs, and Practices.

The American flag or ‘Old Glory,’ is the main symbol through which Americans display patriotism and love of their country. The flag is regularly displayed and flown in front of public schools and is usually on display in classrooms, especially at the elementary school level. The national flag of the United States has undergone many changes since it was first flown during the War for Independence in 1776. Presently the flag consist of thirteen horizontal stripes, seven red alternating with six white. The stripes represent the original 13 colonies ; the stars represent the 50 states of the Union. The colors of the flag are symbolic as well : red symbolizes hardness and valor, white symbolizes purity and innocence, and blue symbolizes vigilance, perseverance, and justice.

The Pledge of Allegiance to the United States is recited in most elementary schools as part of the daily pre-lesson morning routine. Originally written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy a “left-wing” socialist minister, the Pledge has been changed over the years to include several phrases that are considered controversial and Unconstitutional. In 1954 during the rising tensions between the United States and then Communist Russia, President Eisenhower encouraged Congress to add the words “under God.” Much earlier in 1923 the words, “the Flag of the United States of America” were added to replace the phrase “my Flag and the Republic.” Presently the 31-word pledge reads :

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

While reciting the Pledge, students are asked to stand and place their hand over their heart. The Pledge is supposed to be an important part of teaching patriotism to young people in the United States. However, there is opposition to this act primarily concerning the phrase, “under God.” In a large secular, multicultural country like the United States, this phrase can mean many different things. Also, the Constitution of the United States specifically allows religious freedom that also includes the right to not believe in a God or a supreme entity. Some Americans who are not monotheistic also have some objections to this phrase. The daily ritual of having children stand and recite this pledge has also been challenged and criticized by some groups.

One criterion the US courts often consider in “under God” legal challenges is whether or not students feel coerced by either their schools or peers into saying the Pledge of Allegiance. Some states allow students to opt out of saying the Pledge, usually with written permission from a parent or guardian. Currently, 43 states have laws regarding student recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in schools. The seven states that have no laws regarding requirements for recitation are: Iowa, Hawaii, Michigan, Nebraska, Vermont, and Wyoming.

It should be pointed out that though 43 states have some form of state law concerning the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, this does not mean that it is recited every day. Since public school education in the United States is a primary function of the individual state, there is a large variance in how individual state codes regard the Pledge and how those laws are put into practice. Also, while it was previously mentioned that seven states have no legal code concerning the Pledge, this should not be interpreted that the Pledge is not recited in schools in those states.

Based on a document from the Education Commission of the States posted on the Web, http://www.ecs.org/html/educationalissues/CitizenshipEducation/CitEdDB_intro.asp, August 2003, there are nine broad categories in which states may choose to incorporate the Pledge of Allegiance into public school activities.

1. School board or charter school board directors may waive the requirement annually by a majority vote.
2. U. S. pledge required at least once each month, as is instruction of the Mississippi pledge.
3. Commissioner must prepare a program for state schools to use.
4. Pertains only to students in grades 1-6.
5. Statue outlines the right to display the flag, recite the Pledge of Allegiance and sing the National Anthem in schools.
6. Students are required to recite the pledge unless parents or legal guardians object.
7. Students are excused from reciting the pledge upon written request of a parent or guardian. Students are also required to recite the state pledge.
8. The Pledge is required at the beginning of each day in public elementary schools. The law encourages recitation at the beginning of one day per week in public secondary schools.
9. The Pledge is required at least one day per week in grades 1-8.

In addition to the Pledge of Allegiance and the flag, songs and music are also key elements in the teaching of patriotism in America's schools. The most popular song used to instill patriotism is The Star Spangled Banner, America's national anthem. It is played before many school events, especially inter-high school athletic competitions. Students and people in attendance are asked to stand, face

the flag, and join in the singing.

This study did not discover any educational statues at the state level regarding the teaching of the National Anthem or other patriotic songs. Elementary school students usually have some music education classes one or two times a week. In these classes students often learn and practice singing songs with patriotic and or military over-tones. The eight most popular patriotic songs are :

- 1 . The National Anthem (Star Spangled Banner)
- 2 . America (My Country 'Tis of Thee)
- 3 . America the Beautiful
- 4 . God Bless America
- 5 . The Battle Hymn of the Republic
- 6 . The Air Force Song
- 7 . The Marines Hymn
- 8 . Anchors Aweigh

These songs are not required but most elementary school students learn them in their respective music classes. Through informal telephone interviews with four teachers (conducted in December 2009) in four different states (Michigan, Wisconsin, Alabama, Texas) this information was confirmed. Based on an on-line review of teaching guidelines for the individual states, it appears that The Pledge of Allegiance, the flag, and patriotic songs are used more at the primary school level than junior and senior high schools.

5. Patriotism and Civic Education.

Social studies curricula in junior and senior high schools place much more emphasis on educating for civic responsibility than do those in elementary schools. As young people get closer to adulthood and to assuming the role of responsible citizens, history and civics classes are the primary places in schools to foster patriotism. Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, views on how to define and teach patriotism has become splintered into two diverse camps. These polar opposite positions can basically be defined as “loyal patriotism” and “critical patriotism.”

Sociologists e. g., (Apple 2002, Zembylas & Boler 2002, and Nash 2005) contend that uncritical patriotism or blind patriotism is unjustifiable because it conflicts with the legitimate aims of education. Advocates of critical patriotism, such as Nash (2005), and Merry (2004) contend that the legitimate role of civic education is to foster critical thinking skills, which include evaluating both sides of issues and learning how to discern fact from fiction. According to Merry (2004, p 2) critical patriotism is based on the philosophy of Kant’s universalism, which implores people to view their roles in society as not defined by national borders or geopolitics.

Advocates of critical patriotism contend that loyalty to the State is not one of the legitimate aims of education. Without directly saying it, they contend that loyal patriotism will or could lead towards nationalism. Merry (p. 1) contends that loyal patriotism is likely to promote :

- “a myopic understanding both of one’s national history as well as its

contemporary role in a globalized society”

- “an unhealthy attitude of superiority relative to other cultures and political systems”
- “a coerced (rather than freely given) sense of attachment to one’s homeland”

Most left-wing scholars are not against teaching patriotism per say. However, they contend that pluralism helps promote tolerance and that education for civic awareness and social responsibility is necessary, but that patriotism should not be coerced. Supporters of critical patriotism believe the right to dissent, civil disobedience, and conscientious are perfectly valid way of expressing patriotic citizenship.

The uncritical patriotic disposition that Merry describes as loyal patriotism reflects the belief that American democracy is unique and its faults should not be questioned. Political scientist Douglas Lummis defines loyal patriotism as, ‘authoritarian patriotism.’ He describes ‘authoritarian patriotism’ as an emotional based feeling towards one’s country that is void of one’s free will and right of choice. Historian Steele Coomager (1996) noted that those in authority often think criticism of their policies is dangerous. Authoritarian or loyal patriotism opposes dissent and demand allegiance. Two popular slogans that are often used to support loyal patriotism are :

- (1). “My country ; right or wrong.”
- (2). “America : love it or leave it.”

Conservatives contend that the teaching of multiculturalism deletes America's unique position in the world (Lind, 2002). Former speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich contends that in teaching patriotism, schools should teach about America's unique position in the world. This concept of America's unparalleled position in the world is many respects in similar to the Judean belief of "the chosen people." Since the United States is the world's first democratic republic, conservatives want to portray the democratic values of liberty, freedom, justice, and equality as uniquely American. Even before 9/11, conservatives contended that the social studies curricula in public schools focused too much on cultural relativism. Many conservatives believed that ethical, moral, and common cultural traditions were not being fostered in public schools. The battle over prayer in public schools, and the forced recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance were two of the key points of contention.

6 . The Day that Change America.

Following the tragic events that unfolded in the United States on September 11, 2001, a tidal wave of loyal patriotism swept over the country. In many respects the "flag waving" probably helped the nation grieve collectively. During the week of national mourning following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Congress passed a resolution by a vote of 404 to 0 urging schools to display the words "God Bless America" in an effort to restore American pride and resolve. According to Westheimer (2005) six months before the Iraq War began in 2003, the federal government introduced a new set of history and civic education initiatives aimed at strengthening national identity and pride.

It became quite evident that authoritarian type patriotism would be part of the

hidden agenda of civics classes in 2002. Dissent and anti-war views were looked upon as 'unpatriotic.' Within a few months of the terrorists' attacks on 9/11, more than 24 state legislatures introduced new legislation in their respective states mandating patriotic exercises for in public schools.

However, as the warm drums started to beat and the war in Iraq began to unfold in 2003, it became more difficult in America to criticize or question the government's policies. The Attorney General at the time, John Ashcroft said that, "anyone who criticizes the government is giving ammunition to America's enemies." (Phi Delta Kappan, 2006, p. 611).

7. Military Recruiters in Public Schools.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was federal legislation that enacted the theories of standards-based education reform, which is based on the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education. One of the least know aspects of this piece of legislation is the fact that section 9528 of the NCLB Law requires public secondary schools to provide military recruiters with the names, addresses, and contact numbers of high school students enrolled. The NCLB also states that military recruiters are permitted to speak to students as well as take them to various military functions, and provide transportation to/from a recruiting office and to the school. The Act also stipulates that students or parents can opt out of having their personal information shared with military recruiters as well as college and job recruiters. However, many school districts have a generic 'opt out form' that is often not well publicized to students and parents.

While many people contend that the military may be a good career option for some students, some parents and students have complained about the military's heavy-handed recruiting tactics. New York Times columnist Bob Herbert made note of the following key points in the "School Recruiting Program Handbook" used to train military personnel to recruit in public high schools :

- "Black History Month : Participate in events as available"
- "Hispanic Heritage Month : Participate in events as available"
- "Be so helpful and so much a part of the school scene that you are in constant demand"
- "The football team usually starts practice in August. Contact the coach and volunteer to assist in leading calisthenics or call cadence during team runs."
- "Homecoming normally happens in October. Coordinate with the homecoming committee to get involved with the parade."
- "Some influential students such as the student president or the captain of the football team may not enlist ; however, they can and will provide you with referrals that will enlist."
- "If you wait until they're seniors, it's probably too late."

8. The Present Situation.

Almost nine years after 9/11, the flag waving and patriotic rhetoric on America's main streets has dissipated. Although the United States has elected a new president, the country continues to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. Al Qaeda still poses a threat by recruiting and training terrorists to attack and kill Americans all over the world. However, military recruiters are finding it much easier to meet their monthly quotas of new enlistees, thanks largely to the downturn in the American economy.

In public schools patriotism is still taught on an ad hoc basis that varies greatly from state to state and district to district. The policy debate continues over these main questions :

- 1 . What should the schools teach young Americans ?
- 2 . How should schools prepare young people for citizenship ?
- 3 . What are the most important things for students to learn ?

At the micro-level of public education the curriculum debate still boils just beneath the surface of the public's view. Philosophical debates often rage within history departments of individual schools over how best to teach students about the events that occurred on September 11 and its aftermath.

Shortly after 9/11, conservative columnist George Will vehemently attacked the

National Education Association (NEA) the largest and most powerful teachers union in the country in an article in the Washington Post. He said that “the NEA recommended that teachers not ‘suggest any group is responsible’ for the terrorist attacks.” Teachers unions the NEA and AFT have been the targets of conservative attacks since they helped Democrat Jimmy Carter win the White House in 1976. After Carter was elected, he established the Department of Education as a cabinet level agency much to the chagrin of Republicans. For the past several decades’ conservatives have been blaming teachers unions for all or most of the country’s educational problems.

However, after Will’s articles in the New York Times and Washington Post questioning the loyalty and patriotism of America’s public school teachers, a former head of the Department of Education, conservative Republican Chester Finn came forward to publically defend them from Will’s attacks. Finn said that there should be room for civil disagreement about how the schools should teach patriotism, and history, and as well as how to address the recent terrorists’ attacks on American soil. However, he also warned about blind intolerance against Muslims. In his book published on the Internet, http://www.edexcellence.net/detail/news.cfm?news_id=65, “September 11: What Our Children Need to Know”, he warned Americans not to repeat history and unjustly single out a particular (ie. Muslims) group or minorities for blame, punishment, or internment like America did to the Japanese in the United States during WWII. While America didn’t make that same mistake again, the “blind or loyal” patriotism that swept over the country after 9/11 lead to some incidents of violence and intolerance of different ethnic, racial, and religious groups in the United States.

9. Summary.

In a democratic republic like the United States of America, citizens control the government (or at least in theory they do). Public education is provided free of charge for students from kindergarten through the 12th grade. Because of the federalist nature of the American republic, education is a legal responsibility and duty of each individual state. Therefore, although the United States has a cabinet level Department of Education that was established in 1970, each respective state makes its own educational laws. The Department of Education is an agency, which makes recommendations to states and acts as a clearinghouse for federal grants to implement special programs. Due to the decentralized nature of education in the United States, there is no national policy or law regarding the teaching of patriotism in public schools.

Unlike most nations in the world, citizenship in the USA is based on the concept of “birth, not blood, or religion.” Without going into the sad history of “native Americans” and Africans forcibly brought to America as slaves, the USA has a long history of accepting people from other countries and cultures. The schools were and continue to be social agencies for acculturation of young people often to a new culture and society.

Teaching young people about their native country takes place in classrooms in countries all over the world. Usually the lessons are based upon an obscure notion of instilling love of homeland into the hearts and minds of young adolescents. As mentioned earlier, patriotism is often defined as, “love, loyalty, and respect for one’s native country.” The style in which patriotism is taught and implemented through public education will vary greatly, depending upon the type of government

that oversees the public school system that delivers the patriotic lessons. However, in public schools in the United States the obscure goal of educating young people for citizenship is the main theme upon which patriotism is infused into the curriculum.

Most people agree that patriotism also involves some service to their country, but many disagree on how to best perform such service. The philosophical debate over “loyalty and dissent” will continue to simmer in American culture. Hopefully, rhetorical patriotism and symbolic gestures that smack of jingoism will gradually decline into a more pragmatic and natural form of patriotic education will flourish.

Patriotism and education for citizenship needs to be taught in America’s public schools, but “blind loyalty” and emotional flag-waving need to be avoided. Children should be taught to love, respect, and participate in active citizenship and service for their country. However, as they mature in young adults, they should be encouraged to critically think about the role citizens play in a democracy. They should also be taught that the right to dissent and hold unpopular views does not make one less patriotic.

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