

CAN SCHOOLS COMBAT PARTISAN BELLIGERENCY?

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Volume 4 · Number 1 · 2020 · Pages 124-131

In 2006, I delivered my first comments at an academic conference at the annual meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society. I was a graduate student and invited to participate in an author-meets-critic session for Sigal Ben-Porath's (2006) *Citizenship Under Fire: Democratic Education in Times of Conflict*. Written in the aftermath of 9/11 by someone who had experienced life in Israel, her book's central question is: What sort of citizenship education is appropriate during times of war and other protracted conflicts?

Two Conceptions of Citizenship

Ben-Porath's concern is that during war, the public is prone to set aside the values of democracy and unite around a "narrow conception" of citizenship that is so focused on national security and "us versus them thinking" that they are willing to trade away the foundations of liberal democracy (e.g. free speech, privacy, free press). The public succumbs to values she terms "belligerent citizenship" and engages in a public discourse that takes on a you-are-either-with-us-or-against-us attitude that can justify the dehumanization of both compatriots and external foes. Ben-Porath argues that intolerance for dissent is one of the greatest threats to democracy. Yet, it is often the government that promotes this sort of belligerency for the good of the war effort. She argues that in times of war, schools ought to counter belligerency by promoting a "shared fate" view of citizenship—an expansive conception of citizenship which emphasizes democratic values, critical thinking, and resists the state's pressure for conformity.

In my comments, I raised two points. First, I reflected on my ten years as a high school social studies teacher and the challenges I faced teaching young people some of the hard truths about the United States—Black voter suppression, Japanese Internment, Native American genocide, the bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam

war, among others. It is difficult, I responded, to teach toward “shared fate” when there is so much historical evidence showing that the government and citizens are willing to violate basic democratic principles, especially for marginalized groups. At the same time, I often worried that without some sense of shared fate, students could become cynics who disengaged from public decision-making. Second, I questioned whether schools are actually capable of resisting the official messages of the state. My teaching and academic experiences taught me that schools are not walled off from mainstream society; instead, they are a reflection of all that is good and bad. It was hard to imagine the public-school system being immune to the drumbeat of war that Ben-Porath hoped to counter.

Shared Fate or a New Civil War?

Fast forward through the Obama and Trump administrations. It is clear that the United States and other liberal democracies are being over-run by partisan belligerency. Since 1992, polling shows that Americans who strongly identify with a political party increasingly believe that members of the opposing party are a “threat to the nation” (Pew Research Center, 2016). A majority of both Democrats and Republicans believe that members of the other party are closed-minded and immoral (Pew Research Center, 2019). There is distrust among citizens and elected officials, and the overall tone of politics is focused on a game of winner-take-all (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). Recently, Graham and Svolic (2020) found voters with strong partisan identities were willing to vote for party-aligned candidates even when they promote anti-democratic values. Partisanship has emerged as a social identity that engages in “in group and out group” animosity and a willingness to discriminate that runs deeper than racial hostility in the United States (Iyengar, Gaurav & Yphtach, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). In short, living in the U.S. today feels

like an ideological civil war awash in belligerency.

Citizenship Education in Time of Civil War

The tragic events of 2020, including a global pandemic, the murder of George Floyd and movements for racial justice, and historic unemployment has me returning to Ben-Poarth's (2006) question, "What sort of citizenship education is appropriate during a time of war?" Teaching against belligerency and toward democratic values will in many cases look to students and parents as taking a partisan stand. Consider, for example, a teacher who wants to promote media literacy by showing students the well-documented ways in which Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. election as well as earlier elections in Ukraine by spreading propaganda through social media (Mueller, 2019). Though this is a fact, the president insists it is a lie, and many believe him. The teacher will find herself caught between truth and potential pushback. In addition, teaching for a critical understanding of our political culture, including why polarization is happening and the effects of *Citizens United v. FEC* on campaign financing can lead to a political cynicism in which young people feel the system is too corrupt to save. Indeed, the World Values Survey shows that as income inequality and polarization have surged around the world, Millennials are much less supportive of democracy as a political system than older generations (Foa & Mounk, 2017).

In trying to avoid both of these outcomes, a teacher may decide to just "teach the facts." In this case, a civics teacher might present a sanitized version of how a bill becomes a law, that imagines legislators voting their consciences, and say little in detail about how lobbying, special interest groups, and party organizing apply pressure and influence. This route leaves students uninformed about the political process as it is and unprepared for even the most basic form of engagement, namely, following the news.

Within this cluster of tensions, Ben-Porath's aim of shared-fate citizenship looks to be a worthwhile approach. The appeal of shared fate is that it attempts to shift how one identifies with politics. The psychology around partisanship shows that *identifying* with the party in a way that endorses us-vs-them thinking is at the root of belligerent attitudes (Iyengar, Gaurav & Yphtach, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Applying the aim of shared-fate citizenship would mean that education invites students to put some critical distance between themselves and the major political parties. This would help students resist over identifying with a partisan team and instead promote allegiance to democratic values over party.

Much of my own research has investigated how teachers might do this. Specifically, I have written about how, why, and to what effect teachers engage students in discussion of political issues. (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; McAvoy, 2016; McAvoy & Hess 2013). This research shows that when students discuss issues within politically diverse classrooms they become more comfortable with disagreement and more interested in politics. (They also find the class highly engaging.) And in a more recent study, I found that when students deliberate in politically diverse groups, the group's views pre-post do move people toward consensus and away from ideological poles (McAvoy, P. & McAvoy, G., forthcoming). These are all good outcomes, if one wants to teach democratic values.

Yet, I keep returning the second concern that I raised with *Citizenship Under Fire*. While shared fate is a justified aim for the classroom, schools will not be the institution that saves our democracy. There is an analogy here with racism. I once heard Ta-Nehisi Coates give a talk in which he said, "racism is not a heart problem, it's a pocketbook problem," meaning racism did not emerge because of white hatred for non-white people, it emerged to maintain a political and economic system that advantages the white ruling class. Similarly, belligerency is not merely a heart or identity problem; it has

emerged from a political-economic system that finds it advantageous to foment ideological division. Young people need to understand this reality to engage in informed participation, and perhaps this is a form of shared fate thinking, but changing the hearts of students will not save democracy. Our only hope is for adults and elected officials to disrupt the institutional causes of polarization.

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