

Educating the Public: Why teachers matter

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Historically, public schools in the United States have been charged with a civic mission to educate younger generations for participation in the life of democracy. In fact, the constitutions of many states justify public financing for schools on the basis that education ensures a healthy democratic culture (See Civic Mission of Schools report available at <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org>). How do schools accomplish this goal? The answer that many of us would give is that schools are where children gain knowledge – an understanding of our democratic system, its institutions, and their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Schools' roles in a democracy

However, knowledge is a necessary but insufficient basis for making democracy work. As was evident in the struggles of the fledgling democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, a democratic society also has to nurture certain psychological dispositions in people including:

- tolerance of opposing views
- trust in others
- commitment to civic participation

Schools play a central role in nurturing democratic dispositions in younger generations by creating different types of learning climates both in the classroom and in the school as a whole. There is a large body of literature linking school climates with students' academic motivation and achievement. That work suggests that students are more motivated to learn when they:

- identify as members of the school community
- feel that they and fellow students “belong” there

As the authority figures in classrooms, teachers play a critical role in creating democratic climates for learning. Students have greater confidence in their capacities and are more committed to learning when they perceive that teachers:

- respect them
- apply fair standards
- challenge all students rather than only high achievers

In our research we have found that similar dimensions of a school's climate are important in nurturing students' civic dispositions. Specifically, students are more committed to civic participation and more tolerant and trusting of others when they:

- feel a sense of solidarity with fellow students and pride in being part of the school

- feel that teachers at their school encourage students to voice their opinions and to respect the views of others

(For a fuller discussion of teachers' roles in sustaining democracies, see Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Galloway, in press, or Flanagan & Faison, 2000. Both are available at <http://aee.cas.psu.edu/faculty/Flanagan.html>.)

Defining 'citizenship'

To understand why these two dimensions of school climates are associated with citizenship, we can turn to the definition of citizenship proposed by political theorist Michael Walzer:

“A citizen is most simply, a *member* of a political community, entitled to whatever *prerogatives* and encumbered with whatever *responsibilities* are attached to membership” (Walzer, 1989: 211).

In short, citizenship involves:

- the experience of membership in a community
- the exercise of one's voice and rights in that community
- assumption of responsibilities to the community

Establishing a climate for citizenship in the classroom

Community should be understood here not in a geographical sense, but in terms of a group of people, organization, or institution where one can develop a sense of oneself as part of a “public.” Clearly, citizenship, to be meaningful, cannot be memorized. It must be practiced, and schools are key sites in which younger generations enact and negotiate the meaning of citizenship. The two dimensions of school climate outlined above are important factors in how younger generations become engaged citizens.

1. Feelings of solidarity with others and pride in the institution

The sense that they are an integral part of the school community is fundamental to students' evolving sense of themselves as part of the public. The affective ties youth gain when they feel a sense of community at school generalize to the larger polity and give meaning to phrases like “We, the people.” According to psychological studies, people who identify with an organization or institution feel a sense of responsibility to the group and its members. Likewise, a student's sense of belonging or connectedness at school is positively correlated with his or her civic commitments, and even predicts later engagement in the affairs of his or her community in adulthood.

Participation in extracurricular activities is an especially strong predictor of civic engagement in adulthood because it develops students' competencies in perspective taking, team work, and cooperation. Furthermore, students may gain a sense of collective efficacy, i.e., they may learn that there are some things in life (like political action) that we can only accomplish by working with others.

2. Teacher-student relationships and open-classroom climates

Open-classroom climates have been described in the civic education literature as settings in which a teacher encourages a respectful exchange of students' opinions, even when the views that students voice differ from those of the teacher. Such practices are positively correlated with students' ability to think critically about civic issues and their tolerance for dissenting views. Why? Several "lessons" about democracy and citizenship are communicated when teachers encourage the diverse perspectives of their students to be aired:

- First, students learn that they have a *right to an autonomous opinion*, even if the adult authority holds a different view.
- Second, students learn that they have a *responsibility to listen and to defend the right of others to voice their own opinions*, however much they may disagree with them. One curriculum that encourages such perspective-taking opportunities and inter-group understanding is "Facing History and Ourselves" (<http://www.facing.org>).
- Third, when teachers encourage a free and respectful exchange of opinions in their classrooms and allow students to disagree with them, they welcome students into a community of fellow learners/citizens. As Deborah Meier argues in her book, *In Schools We Trust*, when teachers let it be known that they do not have all the answers, they reveal that the best way to learn is to be public and open to learning new things: "There is no way to get around it: The willingness to take risks, ask questions, and make mistakes is a requirement for the development of expertise. We can learn secretly, but at a price" (Meier, 2002: 14).
- Lastly, when students are encouraged to express their opinions, and adults in positions of authority actually listen, the *youth learn that they have the capacity to effect change*. Their sense of political efficacy and belief that citizens can and should hold elected officials accountable are shaped in part from these everyday experiences. To sustain a healthy democracy, we need an informed and motivated citizenry that feels its participation in the polity matters, its voice counts, and the ordinary citizen's involvement is what makes democracy work.

In summary, democratic learning climates in schools affect students' civic values and dispositions because the students develop a sense of themselves as members of a political community and as effective civic actors in that community. Through their interactions with students, teachers convey messages about social inclusion (i.e., who belongs, whose opinions count) and tolerance and respect for differing opinions, fundamental principles of democracy in the United States. Although the civic role of public schools is regularly challenged by pressures to increase student achievement, we have learned that the types of school climates and teacher-student relationships that are known to promote students' academic motivation and achievement also promote their democratic disposition and civic commitment.

References

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