2017

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Developing Democratic Participation Through Civil Liberties Education in Social Studies Classrooms

Geoffrey L. Earnhart

Abstract: Social studies educators must prepare students for the challenges of a changing world by providing them content knowledge and developing attitudes conducive to participatory citizenship. Most future government policies will have civil liberties implications, thus studying these issues provides a firm foundation for future decision making. Teachers should approach this content using student-centered methods in an open classroom climate in order to build students' political efficacy that they will need for the future. These techniques equip students to be informed decision makers and encourages them to participatory citizens in later life.

Keywords: social studies, citizenship, political efficacy, civil liberties

Introduction

James Cason, the mayor of Coral Gables in Florida, is attempting to determine whether future owners must pay property taxes if sea levels rise and permanently flood their oceanfront homes (Joyce, 2016). Elon Musk and Bill Gates, founders of PayPal and Microsoft, respectively, recently joined physicist Stephen Hawking and hundreds of others to caution governments and technology companies about the dangers of developing artificial intelligence (Sainato, 2015). Today, futurists and technologists worry that exponential growth in automation, made possible by advances in artificial intelligence, may eliminate most low-skill jobs, leaving millions without livelihoods (Thompson, 2015). The MIT Technology Review (2015) argues that self-driving cars must be programmed to weigh the life of the vehicle's occupants against those of pedestrians and decide in emergencies which to endanger.

Technological, economic, and environmental change is occurring at an accelerating rate and in unpredictable ways that will profoundly affect the current generation of students. These changes will require governments to adopt policies that will profoundly affect American society. To effectively influence how future policies will shape communities and society, students must understand and be prepared to act as participatory citizens in the democratic governing process. Willingness to participate in the governing process is largely determined by a person's "political efficacy, [or] the belief that individuals' actions can influence governmental processes" (Levy, 2011, p. 238). History teachers have a responsibility to prepare students to act as participatory citizens by furnishing their minds with civic knowledge and building their political efficacy.

Levy (2011) argues that political efficacy is best developed through the application of student-centered, inquiry-based teaching practices, and that the topic of civil liberties affords teachers a particularly good area of content for building political efficacy. Many current and future social issues have civil liberties implications, providing a common basis for examining these topics. Teachers should conduct these examinations using student-centered teaching practices in classroom climates that incorporate discussion, debate and discourse to foster political efficacy in students, thereby increasing the likelihood that students will participate in democratic society as adults.

Challenges

Social studies educators face a number of challenges when preparing their students to act as participatory, democratic citizens. Foremost among those challenges is overcoming the sense among young people that they are unable to affect the course of the political process. Indeed, when looking at the size and scope of government institutions at all levels in the United States, and the complex, and often hidden, processes of governing, attempting to influence that machine can seem a daunting prospect (Bennet, 2008). By building the political efficacy of students as they mature through their adolescence, social studies educators can help overcome the seemingly insurmountable prospect of participating in the democratic process.

Education reform efforts further complicate the task of preparing students to participate as good citizens in democratic society. The decade following the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act or NCLB, saw many school districts reduce instructional time in social studies, adding time for instruction in the math and English language arts (ELA) concepts assessed by standardized tests. A study by McMurrer (2007) for the Center of Education Policy concluded that "over one third of school districts reduced social studies instruction time by an average of 76 minutes per week in order to add time for math and ELA" (p. 7). While the study did not address whether students experienced a diminution in the quality of teaching, even high quality education cannot make up for vast reductions in instructional time.

Reductions in educational time and the introduction of greater standardized testing does not eliminate the responsibility of social studies teachers to prepare future generations of citizens. Ohio's social studies learning standards (2010) require teachers to use social studies instruction to prepare "students for their role as citizens and decision makers in a diverse, democratic society" (p. 4). However, preparation

is more than accumulating knowledge. A fully prepared citizen also possesses the skills and motivation to actively participate in the processes of governance. Future citizens must be able to acquire the knowledge necessary to develop informed opinions on local and national issues as well as the dispositions towards participatory citizenship. It is necessary for students to participate in democratic processes such as voting, advocating, and organizing. As adults, the students of today may also choose to participate in democratic society through active membership in civic groups, volunteer organizations, or by working to advance policy initiatives. Teachers should define participatory citizenship broadly, so students can develop their own intrinsic concepts of citizenship and participate in society accordingly (Youniss, Bales, Chrismas-Best, Diversi, & Silbersen, 2002).

Helping students develop a concept of citizenship, or prerequisite to participation extending beyond their local communities, presents a further challenge. Students should understand how policies that are made at all levels of government affects their lives. Even after years of social studies instruction, adolescents tend to define their concepts of citizenship based on experiences within their local communities (Chiodo & Martin, 2005; Hickey, 2002). High school students tend to see being a good citizen as obeying the law and helping their neighbors. Such a narrow concept of citizenship is insufficient if the goal is to provide students the skills and knowledge to fully participate in democratic society. However, social studies educators can use content and pedagogical techniques to help students develop more robust understandings of democratic citizenship.

Civil Liberties Education

Ms. Franklin's high school government class is learning about the Bill of Rights. Using traditional teaching methods that include the textbook and lecture, Ms. Franklin explains the individual liberties protected by each amendment, while the students take notes and fill in a graphic organizer. Many students struggle to stay engaged; some ask how any of the material applies to them. Ms. Franklin's students, who come from various socioeconomic backgrounds, are skeptical that anything they do will change how "the government" acts, concerns she struggles to address while ensuring that the class covers all the information required by the state's social studies standards.

Our fictional social studies teacher, Ms. Franklin, faces several challenges in preparing her students to act as participatory citizens. The students struggle to connect the concepts of individual liberty, the text of the Bill of Rights, and their personal experiences. Being able to connect theoretical concepts with real-life situations is critical to the students' ability to make informed decisions about social issues and government policy. Furthermore, Ms. Franklin's students lack political efficacy, a problem exacerbated by the diversity in her classroom. The more students are removed from the centers of socioeconomic power, the less political efficacy they are likely to possess (Campbell, 2008). However, Ms. Franklin can use the content and concepts of the Bill of Rights to prepare students civic knowledge and improve their political efficacy.

By explicitly teaching her students about the Bill of Rights and the civil liberties it protects, Ms. Franklin greatly improves the chances that her students will develop favorable opinions for protecting civil liberties (Goldenson, 1978; Green et al., 2011; Lopez, Levine, Dautrich, & Yalof, 2009). In particular, she can use the Bill of Rights to help differentiate between civil liberties and civil rights, providing appropriate frameworks for assess government policies and actions. Although opinions vary, the concept of civil rights centers on the idea that individuals deserve freedom from discriminatory treatment, usually on the basis of belonging to a protected group, and that governments should provide that protection. Civil liberties, however, centers on the idea that individuals ought to be free from unnecessarily oppressive government authority, and that civil institutions should limit government action in certain areas of society (Schmidt, 2014).

Civil liberties content offers an engaging and robust vehicle for developing political efficacy and civic knowledge in social studies students. Almost every contemporary and future issue facing American society has civil liberties implications, allowing teachers to relate the content to the lives of students. Issues related to the freedom of speech, religion, assembly, protest, due process, search and seizure, gun ownership, and government surveillance saturate the news. Some students may have personal experience with some of these issues and have an opinion on these topics. Although she was writing about history, Yogev (2013) ideas about strengthening political thinking by employing "teaching practices that take into account youthful rebellion and a typical juvenile desire to fix the world" (p. 267) apply just as well to the civil liberties. Issues of autonomy and freedom are fundamental to individual and civic identity, and are likely to engage a wide range of learners in the content. Furthermore, high school is the last formal educational environment for many adolescents to learn about the role civil liberties play in democratic society. Confronting issues related to civil liberties in a structured, well-planned instructional unit offers opportunities to develop the political efficacy necessary to become participatory citizens.

Building Political Efficacy

Across the hall from Ms. Franklin's class, Ms. Park's class also studies the Bill of Rights. After a day covering the content of the Bill of Rights, Ms. Park has tasked each group to create solutions to address the issue of online bullying, taking into account the civil liberties protected by the Bill of Rights. She moves from group to group assessing their progress, asking leading questions, and directing students to the classroom's computers to conduct further research. During the discussion phase, one group proposes a government ban on making disparaging comments online. Another wants the government to monitor the internet for bullying and punish the offenders. Some students object to these proposals on First and Fourth Amendment grounds. Ms. Park moderates the discussion, ensuring students are respectful of their peers' opinions, even when they disagree.

Ms. Park's instructional approach to the Bill of Rights is more conducive to building political efficacy than Ms. Franklin's traditional teaching method. The students in Ms. Park's class apply the concept of civil liberties to a relatable problem that has gained national attention in recent years. Through conducting research and class discussions into such problems, students begin to understand how government policies can affect their lives. That being said, Levy (2011) explains that learning about social issues is not enough to build political efficacy. Rather, developing political efficacy is linked to creative cognitive processes. Addressing social issues is more effective at building political efficacy if students study and develop solutions to problems they can relate to and that they encounter in their communities (Youniss et al., 2002). By requiring her students to develop solutions to community problems, while considering the civil liberties implications, Ms. Park facilitates the development of their political efficacy.

Allowing debate and discussion also improves the development of students' political efficacy and the likelihood that they will become participatory citizens. Morrell (2005) indicates that experiencing a deliberative policy making process can enhance the political efficacy of students with respect to the issues under consideration. This growth in situation specific efficacy is likely to increase student's overall political efficacy. Discussion and debate also instills the respect for a variety of opinions necessary for democratic governance (Campbell, 2008). Ms. Park employs these techniques when she allows her students to discuss and respectfully disagree with the opinions of others on the issue of online bullying.

Ms. Park further enhanced the development of political efficacy in her students with her student-centered teaching approach and open classroom climate. Campbell (2008) defines an open classroom climate as one where students engage in debate, discussion, research, and problem-solving. Campbell indicates that students in such classrooms tend to retain more content knowledge and demonstrate stronger, positive feelings towards civic participation. Furthermore, students gain greater appreciation for conflict and respectful disagreement in democratic processes. It was also evident that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who are the least likely see civic participation positively, demonstrate greater willingness to participate in political society when they learn social studies in an open classroom environment (Campbell, 2008). Ms. Park's open classroom climate contributes to the development of political efficacy in her students.

Conclusion

Employing the approaches advocated in this article entails some risk-taking on the part of the teacher. When examining issues related to civil liberties, teachers should remain cognizant of several issues. First, social studies educators must avoid introducing their political beliefs into the classroom. Explicit or implicit communication of teacher bias will taint discussions and alienate students possessing different opinions. Second, students are likely to align with other students sharing similar opinions on certain issues, but teachers must be sure that all students feel free to express their opinions. Civil discourse is the goal, which a loud and unified group might undermine if left unchecked. Finally, teachers must understand that certain topics are more politically charged or personally sensitive than others. Students may disagree on the best approach to stopping online bullying, but are unlikely to agree that such behavior is unacceptable. More politically contentious issues such as gun ownership or abortion generate no such consensus and should be approached with careful consideration.

Despite the potential controversy of addressing civil liberties content, social studies teachers must prepare students for the unpredictable and accelerating changes of the future. These changes will require government policies that impact future citizen's civil liberties. To develop participatory citizens capable of meeting these challenges, teachers must provide necessary content knowledge and facilitate the development of political efficacy in students. Civil liberties instruction provides a robust and engaging field of content that teachers can use in conjunction with student-centered teaching approaches in open and respectful classroom environments to prepare their students for the challenges of participatory citizenship in the future.

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