



Center for Civic Education

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Civic Education, Character Development, and Safe and Healthy Learning Environments in Schools

by

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Preface

I'm pleased to be able to speak to you on this twentieth anniversary of the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. I am also very pleased with the fact that the Office is the principal supporter at the federal level of both civic and character education. I was asked to preface my talk today with some observations about how civic education has evolved over the past twenty years, what its impact has been on classrooms and academic achievement, and what kinds of partnerships have evolved among educators in civic and character education. I'll make a very few brief, off-the-cuff observations about civic education in response to these questions.

First, there are more teachers qualified to provide really good instruction in civics today than in the past. However, there are not enough of them. There are a greater number of good curricular programs available in civics than in the past. However, they are not used widely enough. We can look at the most recent NAEP findings and reach the conclusion that only about 20 to 25 percent are receiving adequate instruction in civics. Just as there is a greater gap between the rich and the poor in our nation today than in the past, there is a greater gap between the well and the poorly educated in civics. This discrepancy is due to the fact that relatively few students are receiving excellent civics instruction. The reasons for this are probably evident to everyone in this room. I won't dwell on them now, but will turn to the topic of my paper, which is a response to the following question: How can civic education programs contribute to the development of character and to the establishment and maintenance of safe and healthy learning environments in schools?

Civic education, character development, and safe and healthy learning environments in schools

I'll begin by saying that these outcomes are obviously the responsibility of the entire school experience. They are the responsibility of all of the adults occupying the various roles in the school environment. They are the responsibility of teachers of all subjects, administrators, and all of the support staff. All should work cooperatively together to fulfill the mission of the schools. Civic education has a particularly important role to play in attaining these goals.

It might not be readily apparent how civic education might contribute to the development of character or to a healthy learning environment. However, a reflection upon the goal of civic education might make its relevance more apparent. The goal of education in civics and government is the informed and responsible participation in the political life of their communities and nation by competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. Effective and responsible participation requires the acquisition of a body of knowledge and of intellectual and participatory skills. Such participation also is furthered by the development of certain traits of character or dispositions and commitments. These are traits and commitments that enhance the individual's capacity to participate effectively in the political process. They also contribute to the healthy functioning of the political system and the improvement of society. Much of the same knowledge, skills, and traits of character that contribute to the healthy functioning of a democratic political system also are what are necessary for the healthy functioning of the school environment.

If civic education is to be concerned with character traits, three questions should be addressed. They are (1) what are these traits of character? (2) how might their development be fostered by civic education programs? and (3) what is the relationship between the development of these character traits and healthy learning environments in the schools?

1. What are some character traits that should be fostered by schools? Well-designed civic education programs are intended to foster such character traits as self-discipline and self-governance, a respect for individual worth and dignity, civic mindedness, tolerance, civility, honesty, open-mindedness, and compassion. In addition to those dispositions, civic education is intended to foster a reasoned commitment to those fundamental values and principles that are essential for the preservation and improvement of a free society. For example, civic education programs are intended to foster reasoned commitments to such values as justice, freedom, equality, and the common good. They foster such principles as popular sovereignty and constitutional government, that is, a government embodying such basic elements as a rule of law, representative institutions, checks and balances, and the separation of church and state.

The widespread embodiment of such dispositions and commitments in a population would constitute a healthy democratic political culture. Their widespread embodiment among adults and students in a school would foster a healthy democratic learning environment.

2. How can schools foster such character traits? There are undoubtedly a number of ways to foster the development of desirable dispositions, commitments, and behaviors. They range from conditioning through rewards and punishments, indoctrination, and preaching their value, to fostering their acquisition as a result of reasoned choice and moral commitment. Commitments can result from the development among students of an understanding of the value and benefits to themselves and others of living in a society in which certain desirable traits of private and public character prevail. Do students want to

live in a society where life is nasty, brutish, and short or do they want to live in a society in which people treat each other with respect, where liberty and justice prevail, and where there is a widespread devotion to the common good?

By identifying the various ways in which character traits can be fostered, I am not saying that some means should be excluded, for it is clear that the very young must be conditioned and preaching is inevitable. However, to be consistent with democratic ideas about the rights of individuals and what constitutes a morally responsible person, I think that the predominant mode of fostering desirable traits of character in public schools should be through developing certain knowledge, understanding, and skills that lead to a reasoned commitment to democratic values and principles.

I would like to illustrate how this can be done in schools by relating one of the first experiences I had developing and using curricular materials in civic education. I began teaching elementary school in 1957, and in 1965 I was on sabbatical leave and a graduate student in the School of Education at UCLA. That year an interdisciplinary committee on civic education was created by the deans of the schools of education and law and the chairman of the Department of Political Science. The committee included faculty members from those fields as well as philosophy, social psychology, and sociology.

These were the days when the Supreme Court of the United States under Chief Justice Earl Warren made a number of decisions that required state law enforcement agencies and courts to live up to the same standards of due process of law set forth in the Constitution, Bill of Rights, and Fourteenth Amendment that had been adhered to by federal law enforcement agencies and courts for a number of years. These standards were designed to protect individuals from such misuses and abuses of power as unfair and unreasonable searches, arrests, and detentions; forced confessions, and illegal imprisonment.

These decisions were hotly debated throughout the country as they are in some quarters today. One of the most controversial opinions established the Miranda rules requiring police to inform suspects being detained of their right to remain silent and to have an attorney present during interrogation. Another was the exclusionary rule, which prevented the use in court of evidence gained by police in violation of the Miranda rules or other limitations the Court had placed upon their powers.

Although these decisions are legitimate and appropriate matters for public debate in a free society, as are all Court decisions, knowledgeable people throughout the nation were alarmed and dismayed at the frequently ill-informed and vitriolic nature of public discourse and the profound ignorance of the Constitution it reflected. This concern was increased by several public opinion surveys at the time that revealed widespread ignorance of the Bill of Rights and the lack of support for its principles, particularly those guaranteeing individuals the protection of due process of law.

In response to this situation, the Committee on Civic Education decided to support the

development of a curriculum for upper elementary students on due process of law, that is, the procedural protections of individuals' rights to life, liberty, and property embodied in the Constitution. The goals of due process are to make sure that reasonable and fair procedures are used by law enforcement officers in arrests, detentions, and investigations. Furthermore, that procedures used by courts in the trial of those accused are reasonable and fair and designed to ensure that all information required for a just decision is made available and given due consideration. The procedures serve the interests of protecting the rights of the innocent and guilty alike and protect the security interests of society and its interest in maintaining a just society.

All of this might seem too complicated to teach to upper elementary students, but it is not. We developed a curricular unit on due process of law that required students working as a class to examine real and hypothetical situations that placed them in the position of developing their own rules. These rules encompassed the types of situations covered by due process, that is, rules governing arrests, searches, interrogations, detentions, trials, appeals, and so forth. In doing so, students were led to create, explain, and defend their own due process protections that paralleled those in the Constitution. They then debated the application of their rules to real situations they found in the news, on television shows, and in their own experiences.

The results were amazing in terms of students' knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, and behavior. The pilot program was held in the University Elementary School (UES) at UCLA. Professors of constitutional law observed the fifth-grade students in the program and said that in many ways they had a more profound understanding of constitutional principles and the reasons underlying them than their first-year law students. Not only did students understand the basic ideas of due process, their understanding enabled them to identify due process issues in the news and on television programs. For example, students observed that *Mission: Impossible* included numerous violations of due process in every program. Perhaps most relevant to our topic today is the fact that the students' understanding led to changes in their behavior. When they had disputes on the playground, instead of resorting to abusive arguments, they asked the yard teachers to preside over fair hearings to which they brought witnesses on the behalf of the opposing parties. At one time when they considered a particular yard teacher to be biased, they went to the principal to get what they thought would be a more impartial hearing.

The success of this program at UES led to a larger pilot program in ten schools in the Los Angeles Unified School System, including schools in the central city followed by a statewide program in California. The results were the same. Students were not only capable of understanding the subject at a much higher level than most people might expect, but their understanding and the kind of interactive learning experiences that generated it also led to changes in their attitudes and behavior.

The programs and experiences of those of us who were a part of the Committee on Civic Education were the genesis of our current Center for Civic Education and its programs.

The Center's programs embody essentially the same conceptual and methodological approaches of the first unit on due process of law. They are now conducted in every state and congressional district in the United States and in more than 70 other countries throughout the world.

Center programs all focus on the development among students of a profound knowledge and understanding of democratic values and principles. They also develop the intellectual and participatory skills required to usefully apply that knowledge and understanding to their daily lives and to the political life of their communities, their nation, and their world. The interactive methodology used to impart this knowledge and these skills results in the development of the kinds of character traits that are desirable both in the school environment and the nation.

Since I began with an example of a program from the sixties, I would like to provide two recent examples of how such outcomes can be fostered by curricular programs focusing on knowledge and understanding and using interactive methodology to foster intellectual and participatory skills which all, in turn, foster civic engagement and desirable character traits.

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution is the most extensively used of the three major domestic curricular programs of our Center. It is focused upon developing students' understanding of the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy, the history of their development and application, and their relevance to their daily lives and to contemporary issues. The program employs an interactive methodology that calls for students to work cooperatively in small groups and as a class to evaluate, take, and defend positions on constitutional questions and issues.

We the People includes an academic competition during which classes are divided into six teams that work cooperatively. They prepare and make presentations on questions regarding the Constitution before panels of adult experts from their communities. Since entire classes compete against other classes, it is in the interest of each student that every student does well. This results in an intense cooperation among students on each of the six teams in a class as well as among the entire class. Research indicates that this leads to a very high level of academic achievement. It also fosters a reasoned commitment to democratic values and principles, such as support for individual rights and a rule of law; an understanding and appreciation of diversity and tolerance; and feelings of political efficacy. Furthermore, **We the People** increases student participation in the political life of their community and nation.

Project Citizen is another major curricular program of the Center. The methodology is similar to that of the **We the People** program, but **Project Citizen** calls for entire classes of students working in teams to identify, propose, and advocate solutions to public policy problems in their communities. Studies have shown that when properly implemented, this program results in the same desirable changes in dispositions and commitments as the **We the People** program.

I have focused on how our Center uses a formal academic approach coupled with interactive, experiential methodology to foster the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, intellectual and participatory skills, and certain desirable dispositions and commitments. The formal curriculum is augmented by related learning experiences in both school and community that enable students to learn how to participate in their own governance. These experiences include bringing people from the community into the classroom to assist in instruction and the active engagement of students in the political life of their communities.

In the past, the Center's programs have never provided explicit instruction designed to teach particular dispositions, such as civility, compassion, or tolerance. However, the most recent editions of the **Project Citizen** program call upon students to think about their experiences of working cooperatively together. Students reflect on their efforts to identify public policy problems in their communities, evaluate alternative solutions, propose a solution that does not violate constitutional principles, and attempt to get local authorities to consider and adopt their proposed policy.

Upon reflection, it becomes apparent to students that when they were working cooperatively to fulfill the tasks of **Project Citizen**,

- they were proposing that their government fulfill one or more of its basic purposes, such as protecting the rights of individuals or serving the common good,
- they were exercising basic rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy,
- they were expecting public officials to fulfill their responsibilities to the people, and
- they were proposing policies that were consistent with fundamental values and principles of democracy.

The final step in this process of reflection contains the first attempt the Center has undertaken to focus explicit attention on character traits that are important to a democracy. Students are asked to reflect upon how such character traits were involved in their experiences and how they might be important to the healthy functioning of a democratic society. These traits include individual responsibility, self-discipline/self-governance, civility, courage, respect for the rights of others, honesty, open-mindedness, critical-mindedness, willingness to negotiate and compromise, persistence, civic-mindedness, compassion, and patriotism understood as a reasoned commitment to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy.

This addition to the curriculum is too recent to have performed a comprehensive evaluation of its impact. However, observations in classrooms of students' reflections and reports from teachers indicate that the exercise appears to be quite effective in helping students learn to explicate what has been implicit in their learning experiences. We can only speculate that this process will have a desirable effect on student dispositions and commitments. We intend to develop means to test this hypothesis in the near future.

3. What is the relationship between the development of these character traits and healthy learning environments in the schools?

So far I have focused upon what might be called the formal curriculum. In addition to the formal curriculum, the importance of the informal curriculum should be recognized. By “informal curriculum” I mean the political culture of the school. The governance of the school community and relationships among all of those within it should embody the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. Classrooms and schools should be managed by adults who govern in accordance with constitutional values and principles and who display character traits worth emulating.

As I noted at the beginning of this presentation, well-designed civic education programs foster among students such character traits as self-discipline and self governance, a respect for individual worth and dignity, civic mindedness, tolerance, civility, honesty, open-mindedness, and compassion. In addition to those dispositions, civic education has been demonstrated to foster a reasoned commitment to those fundamental values and principles that are essential for the preservation and improvement of a free society.

The interactive methodology and cooperative learning experiences characteristic of well-designed civic education programs promote a high level of academic achievement that enhances self-esteem among students and promotes a positive view of their colleagues. The civic engagement provided by such programs empowers students by enabling them to make positive changes in the school and their communities. Students become part of the solution to problems in their schools and communities, which in turn promotes positive relationships among students, teachers, administrators, and the general community.

Together, the knowledge, understanding, skills, and character traits fostered by well-designed and implemented civic education programs can foster within the school a democratic political culture embodied in the hearts and minds of adults and students alike that greatly increases the likelihood of schools becoming safe places in which student learning and maturation can flourish.