

The New York Times**Opinion****Good Students and Good Citizens**

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The anniversary of Sept. 11 has prompted a debate about how best to impart to American students proper attitudes and dispositions like tolerance or a love of country. Many liberals and conservatives, though they might disagree about the specific content of what should be taught, share the assumption that such education is an appropriate responsibility of public schools. They are wrong: civic education of this sort is at best ineffective, and often subversive of the moral purpose of schooling.

This is especially true in times of uncertainty and war, when the impulse to teach our students what it means to be American is particularly strong. In the current political discourse, civic education means more than instruction about the functions of government. It also aims to instill morality, patriotism and the virtues of good citizenship.

This kind of "patriotic" education has been popular at various times in history; during the French Revolution, the Jacobins proposed using the public schools to combat the moral and political influence of the Catholic Church.

In America, calls for this type of instruction have come in waves, usually in reaction to real or imagined foreign threats. A 1796 textbook, for example, warns schoolchildren of the danger posed by "infidels" to our republic. In the 1850's many educators focused their lessons on the threat presented by Irish Catholic immigrants to America's Anglo-Saxon, Protestant virtues. In 1917 many states passed laws requiring public schools to promote patriotism by forbidding any instruction, like teaching the German language, that might be regarded as disloyal.

The arguments in support of civic education are often seductive. In a pluralistic democracy where citizens disagree about many matters of morality and religion, instruction in civic values offers the prospect of a compelling moral purpose for public education that we all can endorse. After all, who would disagree that we should equip students not only with the information and skills necessary for effective political participation, but also with genuine civic virtue -- that is, the desire to act for the good of the nation?

Although we might emphasize different civic virtues, don't we all honor a love for our country, a respect for human rights and the rule of law, and the disposition to defend these values? Since no one is born with an innate understanding of these virtues, they must be learned, and schools are our most visible institutions for learning.

But this argument suffers from a logical fallacy: Just because civic virtues must be learned, does not mean they can be easily taught -- and still less that they can be taught in schools. Nearly every political scientist who studies how people acquire knowledge and ideas about good citizenship agrees that schools and, in particular, civics courses have no significant effect on civic attitudes and very little, if any, effect on civic knowledge.

Contemporary political science ratifies the wisdom of political philosophers, ancient and modern: public virtue is acquired only by active participation in public affairs. Becoming a "good citizen" is important, but schools turn out to be very inept instruments for teaching good citizenship.

As the recent furor over the lessons of Sept. 11 illustrates, we as a society have a difficult time agreeing about what moral or political lessons might be drawn from any particular historical or current event. But even if we could agree, these lessons would be either irrelevant to or, worse, destructive of the inherent moral purpose of schooling.

Advocates of civic instruction share the widespread but false assumption that schools lack a compelling moral dimension. Our contemporary pedagogues define the aims of academic education in amoral terms: it is supposed to provide students with the skills to acquire and use information. But perhaps the ideal of a good student involves not just the command of information, but enthusiasm for the pursuit of knowledge.

In that case, what should be taught are academic or intellectual virtues like thoroughness, perseverance, intellectual honesty. If academic education has this moral purpose -- namely, the acquisition of traits that lead us to be conscientious in the pursuit of truth -- then much of the rationale for separate instruction in civic virtue falls away.

Few of the proposals for civic education are in any way related to the academic mission of schools. Thus civic instruction will almost certainly be irrelevant in the minds of students -- or worse, it may actually undermine the pursuit of knowledge. The aim of teaching students to love (or, more recently, to criticize) their nation has all too often prompted textbook authors and teachers to falsify, distort and sanitize history and social studies.

Some advocates claim that civic instruction poses no threat to truth, setting aside all historical experience and common sense. Others frankly admit that civic uplift must sometimes take priority over truth. Whether implicitly or explicitly, both groups express contempt for the moral lessons inherent in real learning.

The late Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, when asked his assessment of the French Revolution, is supposed to have replied: "It's a bit too soon to say, is it not?" Yet advocates of civic education are sure they already know the lessons of Sept. 11, and they seek to impose those lessons upon a captive audience of schoolchildren. In doing so, they misuse not only history but also education.

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