

TEACHING PRACTICES AND YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICA AS A JUST SOCIETY

There has been relatively little research in recent years on the processes whereby children come to be “good citizens” which we define as people who identify with and want to contribute to a ‘common good’. Yet we know even less about those factors related to the development of civic values among youth who are members of minority groups. This is a serious oversight, given current projections that, by the year 2050, more than half of the population in the United States will come from minority groups (Roberts, 1993).

As the earliest formal public institutions children encounter, schools are like mini polities where children can explore what it means to be a member of a community beyond their families, where they learn that they are the equal of other citizens, and where they can learn how to negotiate their differences in a civil fashion. In contrast to families and even the religious and voluntary organizations with which youth might choose to affiliate, the school is an institution they are obliged to attend. In these public settings, students can disagree with or even dislike one another; yet they have to learn to work together. Although their civic role has waxed and waned, one of the main purposes of public education is to enable fuller participation of the population in the life of the democracy. In short, depending on the kind of public space they provide, schools are a place where children can develop an understanding of what it means to live in a civil society and how members of such a society treat one another. But the choices of teachers are pivotal.

Based on surveys of approximately 900 American middle-school and high-school students from African-, Arab-, Latino-, and European-American backgrounds, we found that, when teachers insisted on a civic ethic in their classrooms (i.e., treating all students

in a fair and equal fashion, respecting students' ideas and opinions, encouraging students to listen to and exchange perspectives, and intervening to stop acts of student intolerance) students were more likely a) to feel that America was a just society and b) to feel personally committed to such civic goals as promoting equality, improving their communities, and serving others in society.

Teacher practices were more powerful predictors than were community factors including a sense of cohesion and caring in the community. Our first general conclusion is the strong and consistent relationship that the youth's sense of fair classroom climates has on his/her belief that America is a just society and on his/her civic goals. Across all racial/ethnic groups, students were more likely to believe that civic equality (i.e., fair and equal treatment of individuals, regardless of their background) existed in America to the extent that they experienced a civic culture at school. Furthermore, they were more likely to say that it was personally important to them to contribute to the common good through public service and to promote equality through building tolerance and helping the less fortunate if they felt that their teachers promoted a democratic and tolerant climate at school.

The results of this study point especially to the key role of schools as public institutions where the principles of a democratic social order are learned and children develop a belief in the fundamental fairness of their society. Our measure of teaching practices taps both the teacher's personal respect for all students and his/her insistence that students themselves will act in a civil fashion to one another. This insistence on a civic ethic may be especially important in an increasingly diverse society.

Elshtain (1990) has observed that, although democracies require laws and institutions, they also rely on “democratic dispositions” in the population, i.e., the readiness to work with others different from oneself toward shared ends. The results of our work suggest that, by the kind of public space they provide, schools enable children to develop such democratic dispositions. These data suggest that if our goal is an inclusive society where members of minority groups believe in the principles of the polity and commit to service of the polity, the choices that teachers make are pivotal.