Nurturing Civic Lives: Developmental Perspectives on Civic Education—Introduction

Melvin J. Dubnick, *Rutgers University, Newark*

From its inception in 1996 until its quiet demise in 2002, the APSA Task Force on Civic Education managed to generate an array of "outputs." For good or ill, there emerged no comprehensive statement or grand strategy that can be pointed to as the group's historical legacy. This was due, in part to a moderate set of expectations informed by past experience (see Schachter 1998) and the existence of a number of active projects already energetically engaged in confronting the issues of civic education and civic engagement (e.g., Civnet, CIRCLE, Civic Practices Network, National Issues Forum, etc.). A Task Force "Articulation Statement" (Carter and Elshtain 1997) reflected some degree of consensus among Task Force members, but was intended as a means for generating reactions and facilitating further discussion rather than as a statement of conclusions or an agenda for the field. The Task Force also sponsored a number of professional conference panels, developed a section of the APSA web site devoted to civic education and related activities, and established a "list serv" (APSA-Cived) that continues to regularly inform a few hundred subscribers about relevant issues and activities.

This symposium is the byproduct of another Task Force project—an effort to bring together scholars from political science and psychology who share a common interest in "youth civic development." Working under a grant from the W. T. Grant Foundation, a meeting was hosted by the McHugh Family Endowment in March 2001 at Colorado College's Baca Grande Campus to explore their common focus on "those factors in the lives of children—in their families, peer groups, schools, and communities—that promote (or retard) feelings of membership and the development of a 'civic ethic' among young people." More specifically, the meeting was intended to forge working linkages among political scientists and developmental psychologists with the goal of targeting research and practice that would enhance the quality and effectiveness of civic education and engagement.

Historically, this is no mean feat. The emergence of developmentalism as a dominant educational philosophy over the past century posed a fundamental challenge to civic education projects that were central to the mission of the political science profession from its organizational birth in 1903. Each was based on contrary assumptions about the purpose and pedagogies of education, and the idea that they could eventually be melded to form a 21st-century approach to civic education would seem to some a well-intentioned exercise in fantasy.

Civic education in America has its roots in a "traditionalist" educational philosophy that took seriously the assumed pre-social and anti-social nature of the uneducated child. At worse, children were viewed as "barbarians at the gates of civilization" (R. S. Peters, cited in Carr 1998); at best, they were undisciplined and lazy beings who required highly structured instruction in basic facts and doctrines by the likes of Charles Dickens' infamous Mr. Thomas Gradgrind. The task of civic education was equated with that of traditional moral education—to instill in children those shared values that are central to the moral community of citizens, and in the process to inculcate those habits of character associated with being a good citizen. It was an educational agenda based on cultivating affection rather than cognition (Heater 2002). The purpose of civic education in the United States in the traditionalist mode—from its initial form as part of religious catechisms in colonial America to its integration into readings (e.g., McGuffey's Readers), rituals (e.g., the daily Pledge of Allegiance), and textbook narratives of public school curricula—was to inject loyalty and patriotism into the process of preparing students for their roles in society and the economy. In its more moderate form, the traditionalist perspective assumed that there was a specific body of civic values and political knowledge required for citizenship, and a part of the school curriculum needed to be set aside for relevant and explicit instruction on those matters.

Such an approach was anathema to the developmentalist philosophy of progressivist education. From its roots in Rousseau's *Emile* to its articulation in the works of Piaget and his followers (Carr 1998; Stone 1996), developmentalism assumed a more positive view of childhood and children. For them, the idea of education through indoctrination implied by the traditionalist civic education agenda seemed the very definition of miseducation. Based on the assumption that children are inherently predisposed to the moral treatment of others, the greatest danger of traditional forms of education from the developmentalist perspective is the possible corruption of that natural goodness. The task of education is to nurture those moral—and civic—predispositions rather than challenge their natural emergence through the imposition of artificially conceived notions of civic life. This Roussauean perspective was reinforced in the United States by Dewey's influential views on democratic education that regarded schools as a place where children are taught "how to think" rather than "what to think." This was, in turn, complemented by a strong liberal aversion to prescribed—or proscribed—curriculum content that smacked of xenophobic and racist doctrines. The result, in theory if not always in practice, was a negative view of civic education and the eventual disappearance of courses explicitly devoted to "civics" from the standard K–12 curriculum. Much of this gained empirical support from studies that, until recently (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Niemi

Melvin J. Dubnick is professor of political science and public administration at Rutgers University, Newark. He served as co-chair (with Jean Elshtain) of the APSA Task Force on Civic Education from 1996 to 2002, and is an editor and list-serv manager for APSA-CIVED. He is currently working on a book titled "Educating Nomads" that explores the pedagogic implications of immersive media for the future of civic education.

and Junn 1998), documented the ineffectiveness of formal education in providing students with basic political knowledge.

The emergence of the youth civic development perspective reflected in the following articles can be regarded as (1) a natural extension of the ongoing work in the developmentalist perspective, (2) a reaction to challenges posed by a reinvigorated traditionalist movement in education, and (3) a growing concern with the perceived critical condition of our civic life.

Within the developmentalist paradigm, one cannot ignore the powerful influence of Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development approach—an influence that effectively re-legitimized a related concern for civic life among developmentalists. Kohlberg's view of the "child as moral philosopher" (Kohlberg 1968), with its emphasis on the inherent moral dispositions of youth, was easily transformed into a perspective that regards the "child as a good citizen." Kohlberg put his views to work in the establishment of the Cambridge (MA) "Cluster School" in the 1970s, and in the process made explicit in practice the link between moral development education and civic life. It is an important legacy with significant implications for the work in the field (Carr 1998).

The interest in youth civic development has also been spurred by the rebirth of support for traditional forms of moral education and character education during the 1980s and 1990s (Bennett 1992; Lickona 1991). The developmentalist bias toward more indirect forms of civic education had created a vacuum in the K–12 curriculum that William Bennett and others moved to fill through political efforts at both the national and local school board levels. By reconfiguring the developmentalist model to elevate civic experiences and values as a major component of childhood and adolescent development, the youth civic development approach has provided a justification for devoting more explicit attention to political and civic knowledge and skills in the curriculum without having to accept the traditionalist critique of the "death of character" (Hunter 2000) or its moralist educational agenda.

Finally, the youth civic development approach has been energized by a growing awareness within the developmentalist community that all is not well in our civic lives. Among those concerned with the condition of our liberal democracy, the challenge of "democratic education"

("to maintain the precarious balance between not violating individual freedom and yet encouraging moral commitment to democratic values"; Puolimatka 1997, 461) has generated well-articulated rationales for revisiting the issue of appropriate civic education curriculum and pedagogy (Galston 1988; Galston 2001; Gutmann 1980; Gutmann 1987; Macedo 1995; Macedo 1999). The contemporary crisis in "social capital" expressed in Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone" thesis (Putnam 1995a; Putnam 1995b; Putnam 1996; Putnam 2000) has proven a potent stimulant as well.

Connie Flanagan's overview of two recent studies reflects the fundamental assumptions of the current developmentalist perspective. The central issues of the research she describes revolve around what forms of childhood and adolescent experience nurture the "ethic of civic participation" and "democratic dispositions" that are already present in the child. While informed by the political socialization studies of the past, the youth civic development studies undertaken by Flanagan and her colleagues

> [T]he youth civic development approach has been energized by a growing awareness within the developmentalist community that all is not well in our civic lives.

place that work in a different theoretical context. As Robert Dudley and Alan Gitelson note, during its "bull market" days, political socialization research was shaped by a concern for uncovering the childhood sources of adult political behavior and attitudes. The developmental perspective was absent or secondary to the Freudian, neo-Freudian, and related theories that were indifferent to claims of some inherent moral or social nature. And while more recent studies of political socialization and political knowledge have not assumed an explicitly developmental perspective, Dudley and Gitelson point to an increasing interest in "understanding the developmental links between early childhood and adolescence and the ongoing adult process of political socialization. . . ."

The influence of the developmentalist perspective is evident as well in the

design and analysis of the latest IEA Civic Education Study described by Judith Torney-Purta and Jo-Ann Amadeo. Going beyond the scoring of political knowledge among adolescents, the recent studies focus on the age factor to generate some insight into the particular role of youth development in civic awareness, attitudes, and knowledge. A similar cross-national and cross-cultural research agenda provided Kohlberg with the empirical support required to extend his moral development model.

The research reported by Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, and Keeter is not explicitly embedded in a developmentalist frame, although the effort to track the path of youth civic engagement in the DotNet generation is clearly informed by that perspective. This is most evident in the stress on finding those "prods" in adolescent life that will enhance future civic engagement—a view clearly in line with the idea that there is a predisposition to involvement that can either be fostered or limited by exposure to certain experiences.

The study summarized by Edward Metz and James Youniss is more explicitly tied to the developmentalist view. While stressing the role of inclinations and psychological dispositions in their analysis, the authors are careful to note the influence of other factors as drawn from other work on volunteerism (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). For civic education, however, the idea that community service initiatives and related activities increased the likelihood of future civic engagement has obvious implications for discussions of civic-relevant curriculum.

Finally, Lonnie Sherrod and his colleagues at Fordham are relying on the developmentalist perspective to help in the design of educational "strategies of intervention" that will be used to enhance future civic engagement among marginalized youths. By studying the political views of these youths—establishing where they are in their stage of civic development—Sherrod hopes to develop means for promoting civic youth engagement among racial and other minorities.

While Sherrod's work is the most blatantly purposive of the group, there is a fundamental normative perspective underlying all these papers and other work on youth civic development. It is a normative position informed by a contested view of human nature. While mainstream developmentalists seem to be making headway in generating validating research and designing and testing interventionist strategies, their work remains vulnerable to attack from those who

254

challenge their fundamental assumptions about children and human nature. These challenges and the questions they raise are far from settled. Furthermore, they come not only from the "usual suspects" (i.e., educational traditionalists and post-modern critics), but increasingly from within the developmentalist community itself (for example, see Egan 2002). While no one expects developmentalists to provide "absolute proof" that their foundational assumptions are correct, there is a need for a credible defense of those assumptions, as well as for a useful model of youth civic development distinct from (but as fertile as) Kohlberg's model of moral development.

The empirical and strategic work on youth civic development along with civic education and civic engagement has accelerated since the Baca Conference. Political scientists are prominent contributors to this work and participants in more exchanges with develop-mental psychologists. There is also more cross disciplinary attention to research and exploration of connections between research findings and practitioner assessments in youth civic development, learning, and participation. This special symposium is illustrative of the growing attention to youth civic development and the value of cross-disciplinary perspectives. It is intended to encourage more research and applications of research on civic learning by faculty.[1]

Note

1 See also *The Civic Mission of Schools* (2003). This report from the Carnegie Foundation and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement is the result of extensive and focused contributions by scholars and practitioners. *The Civic Mission of the Schools* represents a public statement on research findings and their connections to practices to engage youth in learning about civic live and being active in it.

References

Bennett, William J. 1992. *The De-Valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children.* New York: Summit Books.

Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. 2003. *The Civic Mission of Schools.* New York: Carnegie Corporation.

Carr, David. 1998. "Traditionalism and Progressivism: A Perennial Problematic of Educational Theory and Policy." *Westminster Studies in Education* 21:47–55.

Carter, Lief H., and Jean Bethke Elshtain. 1997. "Task Force on Civic Education Statement of Purpose." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30(4):745.

Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Egan, Kieran. 2002. *Getting it Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Galston, Willam A. 1988. "Liberal Virtues." *American Political Science Review* 82(4):1277–1290.

——. 2001. "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4(1):217–41.

Gutmann, Amy. 1980. "Children, Paternalism, and Education: A Liberal Argument." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9 (summer): 338–358.

——. 1987. *Democratic Education.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Heater, Derek. 2002. "The History of Citizenship Education: A Comparative Outline." *Parliamentary Affairs* 55(3):457–474.

Hunter, James Davison. 2000. *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil.* New York: Basic Books.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. 1968. "The Child as a Moral Philosopher." *Psychology Today* (September): 24–30.

Lickona, Thomas. 1991. *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility.* New York: Bantam.

Macedo, Stephen. 1995. "Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of God v. John Rawls?" *Ethics* 105(3):468–496.

——. 1999. *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Niemi, Richard G., and Jane Junn. 1998. *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Puolimatka, Tapio. 1997. "The Problem of Democratic Values Education." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 31(3):461–476.

Putnam, Robert D. 1995a. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January): 65–78.

——. 1995b. "Tuning in, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28(4):664–683.

——. 1996. "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America." *American Prospect* (December): 1, 34–.

——. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Schachter, Hindy Lauer. 1998. "Civic Education: Three Early American Political Science Association Committees and Their Relevance for Our Times." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31 (September): 631–635.

Stone, J. E. 2003. "Developmentalism: An Obscure but Pervasive Restriction on Educational Improvement." Education Policy Analysis Archives 4 (April). http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v4n8.html [February 10, 2003].

Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.