

EDUCATION FOR ACTION

Preparing Youth For Participatory Democracy¹

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The purpose of education is not just for kids to have choices, but for kids to act on their knowledge, to create structures and to change and transform structures so that the world is a better place for everybody.

-- A teacher at C. Wright Mills Middle School

It is often said that today's youth will be called on to solve tomorrow's problems. Schools provide essential preparation for this task. Despite this rhetoric, curriculum that considers the nature of social problems and ways youth might respond as citizens rarely gets center stage. Rather than focusing on ways youth might participate through democratic institutions to foster a better society, curricular discussions focus on the acquisition of academic and vocational skills. To the extent that the democratic purposes of education are raised, educators emphasize conveying knowledge regarding US history and government structures, on opportunities for community service, and on exercises where students simulate the operations of various public institutions such as courts and legislatures. Occasionally, reformers focus on eliciting student input about the design and implementation of a curriculum or on better aligning curriculum materials with students' lived experiences (Wigginton 1986; Wood, 1992). When students conduct oral histories of community members, for example, they fulfill an ideal of democratic education by showing that academic disciplines like History and English have relevance to issues in their own lives and the lives of their community.

These matters are all worthy of attention, but they differ in fundamental ways from efforts to prepare students to improve society. Ever-declining civic commitments and a growing sense of alienation and disaffection among American citizens – as detailed by Mattson and Hayduk earlier in this book – make this task all the more urgent. They ask how American

¹This essay appears in Ron Hayduk & Kevin Mattson (eds.) *Democracy's Moment: Reforming the American Political System for the 21st Century* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 91-107. An earlier version of this piece appeared as the first chapter in William Ayers, Jean Ann Hunt, and Therese Quinn (eds.) *Teaching for Social Justice: A Democracy and Education* (New Press/Teachers College Press, 1998). All names are pseudonyms.

politics can be made more responsive to citizens and what citizens can do to improve our democracy. In this chapter, we look to schools as one part of the answer to their questions. We consider what it might mean to move preparation for membership in a participatory democracy to the center of a school's educational agenda. *Participatory* democracy stands in contrast to *procedural* democracy. In the latter, citizens maintain the right to vote and take part, while in the former, they actually do take part. In framing our discussion of education for participatory democracy -- that is, education that fosters youth's ability to work collectively towards a better society -- we examine a school designed to promote participatory democracy, a school unabashed in its commitment to fostering the attitudes, skills, and knowledge required to engage and act on important social issues. C. Wright Mills Middle School seemed to us to offer such a model, doubtless one among many alternatives.

We recognize that some find this orientation romantic and that other goals are also of great importance. Given the fundamental significance of these democratic goals, however, we believe this alternative agenda warrants careful attention in order to understand its potential, its risks, and the complexities associated with its pursuit.

Voices From The Past: Promoting Critical Analysis, Civic Participation, And Action

In the second and third decades of the Twentieth Century, conceptions of democratic education rooted in commitments to improving society through collective action achieved a wide hearing among educators. Known as "social reconstructionists," these reformers emphasized teaching students to be active participants in a democratic civic community, able to envision, articulate, and act on conceptions of a better world.

Some, such as Harold Rugg, focused on critical analysis of major social issues and institutions. He wanted students to examine "Problems of the 'market' and its historical development," "How the press developed its influence at various times in our growth," and "The history of labor problems; movements for the increase of cooperation between capital and labor; problems of wages, hours, living conditions" (1996:1921, 47). Rugg developed a series of textbooks and learning materials which sold more than one million copies during the 1930s. The goal of this series and of the social reconstructionists more generally, was to engage students in the analysis of major institutions and social issues so that social problems, causes, and ways to respond could be identified. The series of textbooks sold well until the start of World War II when nationalist sentiments made critiques of American society unpopular. Rugg's texts became a lightning rod for the rising anti-Communist power in politics (Fine, 1995; Kliebard, 1995).

A second group of curriculum theorists and educational reformers were attracted to experience-based approaches that emphasized projects tied to social needs. "As the purposeful act is thus the typical unit of the worthy life in a democratic society," wrote William Kilpatrick in 1918, "so also should it be made the typical unit of school procedure" (323). These educators believed that experiential activities could transform students' political and social orientation towards fighting injustice. Their focus bridged their concern for the coarse individualism of the 1920's and the social dislocation of the 1930's with their desire to create "miniature communities" through which students learned the value of working together to identify and respond to problems they confronted (Dewey, 1900). This focus on communal undertakings tied to social

needs led many progressive-era educators to promote what they called the "core curriculum" (see Faunce and Bossing, 1951; Albery, 1953). The "core" was designed to place multidisciplinary analysis and action regarding social problems and themes from social life at the heart of students' school experience. It was a common feature of many schools participating in the Progressive Education Association's Eight-Year Study, for example. Students in the 30 schools that took part in this study commonly spent between two and three hours a day in core classes initiating projects where they examined and responded to major issues facing both individuals and their community. For instance, they studied and initiated programs of environmental improvement, did work with the elderly, orphans, and infants, and examined safety issues in the home and community. (Giles, McCutchan, and Zecheil, 1942).

Then as now, many of those who endorsed "progressive," experience-based curriculum, downplayed the importance of analysis, critique, and action related to social institutions and the pursuit of social justice. Then as now, many progressive educators, particularly those who emphasized a child-centered approach, attended to students' individual interests and needs without engaging students in critical analysis of social issues. What made this period unique was its critical mass of leading educators who believed that "by manipulating the school curriculum they could ultimately change the world" (Cremin, 1988, 187).

Those focused on reconstructing society to make it more democratic found a leader in George S. Counts who, at the 1932 meeting of the Progressive Education Association (PEA), delivered a speech "Dare Progressive Education be Progressive?" which became the book *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* He argued that Progressive Education had "elaborated no theory of social welfare" (1932, 258), that "it must emancipate itself from the influence of class" (259) and that "it cannot place its trust in a child-centered school" (259). In short, he argued that if progress was the goal of progressive education, then progressive educators needed to be explicit about what progress required. Writing during the Great Depression, he was highly critical of our economic and social norms of competition, selfishness, individualism, and inattention to human suffering. He wanted educators to do more than engage students in analysis of these issues. He wanted them to "engage in the positive task of creating a new tradition in American life" (262). As he put it, "the word [indoctrination] does not frighten me" (263).

The speech had enormous impact. Discussions scheduled for the rest of the convention were replaced by informal discussions of Counts' challenge and the PEA leaders and members continued to discuss these matters in detail in committee meetings and through their publications (see Graham, 1967, 66-67). Counts' argument and reactions to it provide a helpful frame for discussing the educational implications of concern for participatory democracy, particularly in relation to the creation of democratic communities which focus explicitly on matters of social betterment.

For some, Counts' writing was a much appreciated wake-up call. It led educators like Paul Hanna (1932) to recommend redesigned teacher education programs that could address this agenda. Indeed, even educators like Dewey and Bode who did not endorse Counts' call for indoctrination, fearing that it mistakenly implied that there were fixed truths that could be transmitted to students, often did support Counts' critique of the educational system. Dewey praised Counts for "arousing teachers to think more about existing conditions, and in exposing the kind and amount of indoctrination for a reactionary social order that goes on in the schools" (Dewey cited in Graham, 1967, 14).

Writing in a similar vein, Boyd Bode supported Counts' general critique that progressive educators needed a direction, but not his program of indoctrination. In *Progressive Education at the Crossroads*, he wrote, "If progressive education is to fulfill its promise, it must become consciously representative of a distinctive [democratic] way of life" (1938, 5). He argued, as we do in this article, that educators must aim at creating a communal mode of life which reflects democratic sensibilities and social analysis -- collective undertakings and the creation of common bonds are not sufficient. This democratic orientation could, he argued, provide direction and norms for school communities without requiring indoctrination.

If those committed to democratic communitarian goals had strong allies, however, they also had fierce critics. "The school is not an agency of social reform," wrote Franklin Bobbit a leader of the social efficiency movement, "Its responsibility is to help the growing individual. [This may improve society.] But this improvement is not a thing directly aimed at" (1937, 75). Moreover, as noted above, many educators who were attracted to experiential project-based activities rejected Counts' proposal. They preferred child-centered goals such as creativity and individual freedom. Elizabeth Moos (1932) reflected the mood of many members of the Progressive Education Association (PEA) when she argued that the focus on the child rather than on society was most appropriate for elementary schools: "During these years, foundation for emotional and spiritual growth is laid, and this work must not be subordinated to any particular social situation" (264). Many educators also worried that the emphasis on radical politics might marginalize the PEA by limiting the support of teachers and administrators (Cremin, 1961, 262). Carlton Washburne (President of the PEA in 1940-42), for example, argued against disseminating the report of Counts' Committee on Economic and Social Problems in 1933, believing that the report might stir "up a feeling on the part of many people who are at the present time overly sensitive that the association has gone radical" (in Graham, 1967, 69). These tensions both in the PEA and among progressive educators generally were never resolved. To the extent that a working consensus was achieved, it came through invoking the goal of "democracy as a way of life," something the different factions within progressive education could support. This support, however, seemed as much a function of the goal's vague nature as of a meaningful consensus (Graham, 1967).

C. Wright Mills Academic Middle School

On a crowded, bustling side street in a Latino community sits C. Wright Mills Academic Middle School. In 1984, the school, located in the heart of a major North American city, closed and re-opened under a court-ordered Consent Decree with an almost entirely new staff and the goal of attracting a diverse student population. Currently, Mills enrolls a student body that is 38% Spanish surnamed, 20% "other" White, 14% Chinese, 9% African American, and 6% Filipino. Once counted among the poorest performing schools in the district, Mills now boasts high attendance rates, high performance on standardized tests, and numerous awards.

Following the consent decree restructuring, the new Mills faculty created a series of mission statements and learning objectives. In many ways, their mission is progressive, but not unique. The school "seeks to develop the whole child academically, socially, and emotionally." The faculty use a "student-centered approach" that develops "self-esteem." They maintain "high

academic expectations" recognizing that students "bring a rich diversity of cultures, experiences, languages, and learning styles that can be developed and shared in [the] school setting."

The Mills tenets, however, also include less typical commitments to improving society. The faculty want students to "think critically about what they are learning, draw appropriate conclusions, and discover what is relevant to their lives." Students will "carry out complex projects involving predictions, research, analysis, and evaluation" and they will do so in "contexts relevant to their education and to their lives." They will learn to "work individually and cooperatively," taking responsibility for "their own lives and actions and for the well being of both the local and global community." (For an in depth discussion of Mills, how it's teachers work collectively, professional development activities at the school, and its governance structure, see Westheimer 1998, chapter 3).

Like the progressive era educators discussed above, the teachers at C. Wright Mills aim to instill in students hope for a more just society and equip them with the tools to pursue that hope. As one teacher explained,

I'd like to see them have an awareness of what makes the world, in their eyes, a good place and a set of skills that allows them to act on their vision. I'd like [students to understand] the need for individuals and groups to act collectively to make the world a good place.

Social Studies and Project-Based Curricular Goals

The curricular approach taken at Mills, similar to that taken by pioneering progressive schools, is to emphasize what the Mills staff call transdisciplinary projects aimed at social needs and to couple these with academic analysis of the social and institutional context. These projects and related analysis comprise a substantial portion of students' work at the school. Indeed, an introducing group of four subject area teachers designing the year's curriculum are more likely to begin with learning objectives linked to their goal of preparing responsive citizens and then think of ways to make links to academic material than the other way around. The challenge for this school and others with a democratic mission is to structure curriculum activities that advance these goals while simultaneously supporting systematic and sequential development of disciplinary knowledge.

In an effort to link the curriculum to the school's mission, teachers decided early on to base their transdisciplinary curriculum in the social studies. To make clear the importance of their discussions, teachers provided links to students' present day realities. Mills' "Learning Challenges," for example, reflect the faculty's belief in the power of interdisciplinary experiences and hands-on, purposeful activities to achieve these ends. Developed in conjunction with Project 2061, a national effort to promote science in schools², these learning challenges bring students

² Though nationally, Project 2061 is devoted to science curriculum reform, in Mills' school district, it serves a broader curriculum reform role across the subject areas; at Mills, in particular, the "learning challenges" inform efforts in democratic education by linking academic learning to social issues.

and faculty at Mills together in interdisciplinary groups to study problems of social consequence.

In many schools, interdisciplinary curriculum revolves around themes. Elementary school students might study dinosaurs through stories, art, and science. Middle school students might carry the theme of "cities" through each of the subject areas. The learning challenge is structured differently. It begins with a prompting challenge that requires investigation and response -- how to respond to hunger or homelessness in the community, for example. The subject areas are then employed in answering the prompting challenge. As Bernard Farges, a Project 2061 Director explains, the educational purpose shifts from the learning objective to *learning from the objective*.

Students work in groups on pieces of a larger project, make presentations on their findings, and take actions with respect to their ongoing commitments to the community. At Mills, the commitment to democratic education means that each challenge that is selected (between 6 and 10 each year) revolves around an issue of social significance.

"Addressing Violence in Our Everyday Lives" was a challenge for an eighth grade group that began with the question: "How can you empower yourself and your peers to address the violence in your life and in society in a positive way?" The two-week challenge began with five days of regular core academic classes that provided students with the background knowledge and skills they would need for week two. Students then broke into groups focused on one of five "sub-challenges." The first, led by the Social Studies teacher, assessed violence in the media. Students watched television and movies, chronicling observations and statistics about what they saw. They interviewed experts in an effort to critically analyze media portrayals of violence. They asked questions like "When you sit down in front of the television, you're doing the watching, but who's really in control, you or the show?" and "Does the media show violence as it really is?" Based on their analysis, students formulated, wrote, and revised action recommendations for their peers.

A second group dealt with the problem of gang violence. The Language Arts teachers engaged students in readings, discussion, and written exercises that examined the causes and impact of gang membership. A group led by a physical education teacher who voluntarily joined this particular family's challenge activities examined violence in sports. They asked how society has condoned and encouraged violence in sports. The math teacher explored the economic costs of violence in their city. After researching the statistics on the costs of different violent activities, students were required to develop solutions to urban violence. Finally, the science teacher led a group that explored violence in families. They talked about the myths and realities of rape, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. They assembled a survival guide with tips and community resources for other teenagers and created a public service announcement which they distributed on video.

For each "sub-challenge" project, students were required to complete learning logs, oral and visual presentations, a substantive written product, and an evaluation of their group's cooperative work process. As would be expected, the curriculum appears to have affected youth in different ways. For one student, the two weeks spoke to personal issues: "I had never dared to talk about all of these things [how violence affects me] before this week. It made me realize how much violence is in my life." Another student was more focused on the imperative of action: "I hope that by talking about some of these things in the classroom, we'll be more able to speak out in the streets about these problems." Though these sentiments were commonly expressed, they were not universal. Many were drawn more to the excitement generated by the

experiential nature of the projects than by the emphasis on critical politics:

It was fun. Like well, it was a lot of hard work because you had to do a lot of research, calling up people...We did all the things on our own. And you know, it wasn't like sitting in class and listening to the teachers talk. It was just like doing things on our own.

Moreover, students did not select this school because of its focus on social issues; they were attracted by the "high [academic] standards," because, "the teachers really want you to learn," and because "the school is safe and teachers are nice." Not all students were ready or interested in engaging in sustained analysis of social issues.

On the other hand, many were. When asked about the learning challenge on violence in their community, for example, one student responded: "We did a poster on violence, that had a slogan: If you don't like a gun in your face, look back to your roots and your race." He went on to explain that learning about the Aztecs can help Latin gang members understand their condition, namely that "they're all killing each other for a color...we're trying to say just look back to your roots and it shows that you guys are all the same [all descendents] from Latins and also we're all just people."

A Project-Based Curriculum

If the desire and capacity to respond to social needs are prerequisites for participatory democracy, young people need to have experiences which develop this orientation and foster these abilities. In addition to traditional academic discipline-based goals, preparation for participatory democracy requires both that youth develop a "spirit of service" and the civic skills needed for effective civic action. Making speeches, writing memos, facilitating and participating in group discussions, organizing community events, and mobilizing fellow community members are examples of skills required for effective participation in a civic democracy. Such opportunities are rare in traditional classrooms which focus primarily on the academic performance of individual students. Indeed, an extensive review of the literature (Berman, 1997) reveals that social studies texts rarely emphasize the importance of or skills connected with civic participation, that teachers rarely engage students in such activities, and that students tend to view participation in their community and school as unrelated to their status as a "good" citizen (also see Dynneson and Gross, 1991). In contrast, both teachers at Mills and social reconstructionists during the progressive era pursued this democratic agenda by making projects connected with social needs a central component of their curriculum.

For example, in one learning challenge we observed at Mills, "The Garden Against Hunger," students produced a brochure showing sites of soup kitchens in their neighborhood, wrote to parents and leaders of city agencies inviting them to attend a fund raiser, and published a newsletter. They created computer data bases to share information with other groups, parents, and members of city agencies and chose sites for brochure distribution. Finally, they made presentations to parents and representatives from city agencies, homeless organizations, local media, and members of the local community.

These learning challenges modeled for students the importance of civic participation and required that students employ the skills needed to engage such tasks. This emphasis is reminiscent of early reforms that engaged youth in projects of social significance to make schools "a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart to learn lessons" (Dewey, 1956: 1990, 14).

A Social Studies Based Curriculum

Mills orients both its overall curriculum and its transdisciplinary projects around social studies. Nationally, the trend is in the opposite direction. Increasingly, mandated tests and other school policies emphasize math, science, and literacy skills rather than social studies. New York State public schools' new curriculum standards, for example, specifies achievement standards across three areas -- math, language arts, and science -- omitting social studies entirely. Social studies, for the New York State Board of Education and others, provide topics, as needed, in the service of acquiring skills in these other three disciplines, but is not viewed as a primary concern.

At Mills, in contrast, disciplinary learning is used in the service of social studies, that is in the service of projects, themes, and objectives of social interest and consequence. Thus, interdisciplinary learning challenges focused on the environment, political elections, food production and distribution, and violence in the community.

In an effort to make students aware that the social issues being studied were not simply matters for abstract speculation, the curriculum consistently linked topics to contemporary issues and their personal experiences. In a literature class, for example, students read a biography of a Native American woman and discussed historical oppression -- the treatment of Native Peoples by the United States Government. Teachers used this as a springboard to examine contemporary and controversial examples of oppression and injustice in their city. A science class studied the environmental impact of European colonization of the Americas and also explored recent environmental damage from an underreported oil spill off a nearby coast.

Education For Participatory Democracy: Two Challenges

1. Development of Academic Skills. Although we argue for emphasizing links between academic work and civic priorities, we also recognize that many educators' hesitation to endorse civic education stems from the concern that this focus distracts them from their most fundamental task -- development of academic skills. We believe such concerns are warranted. Some experiential activities and projects which aim primarily at social development may neglect academic priorities. A math teacher at Mills, for example, described his frustration with trying to tie sophisticated understandings of math concepts to project-based activities:

Some interdisciplinary projects are great and can be a good way to learn. But it's not the best way for all curriculum. Math always ends up accommodating the other subjects, statistics one day, land area the next...A student like Tom ends up doing algebra on the side. It's fine, but are they learning? They're learning math in a way...but mainly social

skills, how to keep on task, issues of tolerance, research skills. That's fine, but pressure's on me to get the math through; I won't get through all I have planned this year because of Challenge Week, Ocean Week, Awareness Month...All these things take away, [and] how it takes away bothers me.

Similarly, Dewey (1931) worried that the projects undertaken as part of the "project method" were often "too trivial to be educative" (86) and that the learning that results is often of "a merely technical sort, not a genuine carrying forward of theoretical knowledge" (87).

Designing curriculum similar to Mills' learning challenges that enable sequential development of disciplinary knowledge is enormously difficult. Often, teachers may not have the time, commitment, or insight necessary to implement this kind of curriculum. This concern parallels contemporary discussions of "hands-on" math and science education where educators worry that the focus on experience may undermine attention to the formal and theoretical aspects of the disciplines (Driver, et al. 1994; Varelas, 1996).

To note this risk, however, is not to concede the case. The same math teacher quoted earlier went on to say:

I like [the interdisciplinary projects] because it gives me a chance to see how students do all around, like Lisa [a science teacher] and I were just talking, you get a broader range on each student...So I can't NOT do challenge week. Instead, I have to say, how else can I do it? Maybe I'll do probability.

This parallels Dewey's (1931) perspective on the project method:

The defect is not inherent. It is possible to find problems and projects that come within the scope and capacities of the experience of the learner and which have a sufficiently long span so that they raise new questions, introduce new and related undertakings, and create a demand for fresh knowledge (86).

Similarly, Deborah Meier (1995), George Wood (1992), and reformers who advocate whole language approaches and constructivism have demonstrated that curriculum that promotes the development of disciplinary knowledge through methods consistent with democratic priorities can be successfully implemented in contemporary schools (see also Fine, 1995, for discussion on the unnecessary division between teaching the "basics" and teaching democratic values). Indeed, Mills was a popular school primarily because of its reputation for high academic standards, and students consistently performed in the top 20 percent of the district on standardized tests.

2. Education or Indoctrination. If a group of visitors walked down the hall at Mills prior to the recent California election, they would have seen walls covered with a variety of posters. Some of these posters simply communicated information:

PROPOSITION 204 -- THE CLEAN WATER ACT

Pro: More water in residential and agricultural areas.

Con: Increase in water costs and taxes.

WHAT IS PROPOSITION 210, THE MINIMUM WAGE?

Currently the minimum wage is \$4.25/hour. Proposition 210 would raise the minimum wage to \$5.00/hour as of March 1, 1997 and to \$5.75/hour as of March 1, 1998.

Other posters, however, presented clear positions on issues of social and political significance:

YES TO PROPOSITION 204: Safe, Clean, Reliable Water Act.

Encourage safe drinking water.

NO ON PROPOSITION 209: 209 Will take away affirmative action and with it the chance for everyone to go to school.

DANA MARTIN FOR THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES: She is Pro-Choice!
She Supports Affirmative Action!

Although most educators and parents agree that the ability to analyze and form opinions on issues is an important part of students' education, the specifics of curriculum and pedagogy that aim to accomplish this goal are far more controversial. When a social studies teacher in a school in Oregon taught a unit on the history of environmentalism, some parents and school-board members objected asserting that the unit was indoctrinating children to be anti-logging and pro-environment. Oregon board members, along with officials of several other districts and states also banned the Dr. Seuss book *The Lorax* which depicts a factory rapidly chopping down all the trees to make a popular, but useless, product because of similar concerns. Similarly, opponents of New York City's proposed "Rainbow Curriculum" argued that the section on prejudice was not to be part of the school curriculum because it contained a passage encouraging tolerance for homosexuals. The conflict ended with not only the exclusion of the passage, but also the resignation of the chancellor of the New York City schools.

When does teaching become indoctrination? How can schools teach students to be critical thinkers when it comes to matters of social policy while maintaining a judicious balance of alternative perspectives? What happens when students examine current issues and explore paths to improving society that conflict with mainstream or parental values? At Mills, for example, some parents and administrators had misgivings about the signs in the hallways described earlier that advocate particular candidates or positions. Before addressing these questions, it is worth noting that the Mills faculty as well as educators of the Progressive Era share two approaches to meaningful explorations of important social issues and that these approaches are themselves the subject of serious debate.

First, both linked their discussion and analysis of important issues to action. Both

groups believed in challenging the prevailing culture of inaction and passivity with respect to issues of social significance and saw action as essential to the workings of a participatory democracy. The primary value of this action lies not in the service it provides, these educators argue, but in the opportunity it offers students to develop skills related to participatory democracy and in the social, participatory orientation it models. This perspective was well articulated by a Mills student who, when asked about the learning challenges, told us:

It teaches us how important it is to have social responsibility, like telling people about what's happening in the world, like the teachers are doing for us, and we're going to do it for the community.

Second, both the Mills faculty and the Progressives worked to ensure that students were exposed to--and could understand--a range of alternative perspectives. A democracy cannot function meaningfully without informed and critical analysis of issues and social problems. Although it is common for social studies teachers and others to engage students in exercises where they must differentiate between "facts" and "opinions," rarely are these discussions linked to participation and action. At Mills, for example, information and perspectives on the legislative issues described earlier are not simply learned, but are communicated to the school community.

Moreover, the ability to discern fact from opinion is developed through explicit challenges to widespread cultural assumptions rather than through re-examination of historical issues which, by virtue of time, have become unassailable. Whereas many teachers demonstrate to students the potential tyranny of opinion over facts in landmark historical controversies (ill-informed legislative decisions based on the idea that Black Americans could not be as intelligent as their White counterparts, for example), both Mills teachers and the Progressives understood that to develop the capacity for critical analysis, students need to examine issues for which their own perspectives and positions could be challenged. That there are not, as of yet, clear "answers" (widespread cultural agreement) to the questions raised specifically makes those issues useful. Whether gay men should be allowed to serve in the U.S. Military becomes a more useful issue for discussion and critique than whether African American men should be allowed to serve. The former forces difficult analysis and consideration of a variety of viewpoints, while the latter, piggybacking on already-established widespread agreement, fails to do so.

Progressive educators may correctly recognize that students must have experiences engaging controversial issues, but this does not mean that they have worked out strategies for doing so which are consistent with both democratic sensibilities and parental concerns. The tensions raised by the approaches to teaching critical analysis and linking learning to action described above are many; educators' pursuit of such goals through curriculum is fraught with complications. At their base, these "complications" arise because the rhetoric of participatory democracy is being taken seriously and enacted. The prevailing culture of inaction and passivity with respect to issues of social significance is being explicitly and overtly challenged. The hesitancy of many educators to engage critically and then act on controversial issues, however, has a rational basis.

First, while the actions students take in conjunction with the Mills learning challenges may be beneficial, others may be inappropriate. In a well functioning democracy, citizens act

when they find issues compelling and after gathering sufficient information. Frequently, students will not find all issues worthy of civic action or will not achieve the level of clarity regarding an issue which would make actions appropriate. Moreover, teachers must have a certain degree of control over their curriculum. Many kinds of actions such as attending a protest or working with a community organization, that would be appropriate for citizens, may not be structured in ways that enable a teacher to be sure a given action will be safe or educationally valuable. Thus, while experiences at Mills demonstrate the substantial educational potential of civic action as part of students' curriculum, there are reasons to temper blanket support of this practice.

Second, the broad consensus that teachers should help students think critically does not mean pursuit of this goal is straightforward. The consensus regarding critical thinking generally vanishes when the possibility arises that students will articulate conclusions that differ from mainstream or parental values. Critical thinking is commonly understood to be the use of reason in reaching judgments, while indoctrination is a process whereby ideologically committed instructors constrain reason in an effort to lead students to particular conclusions (Siegel, 1988). The problem with this formulation is that it assumes a "neutral" ground exists. More exactly, this perspective obscures the ways the dominant culture and ideology are embedded in allegedly neutral reasoning.

Many critics of the kind of curriculum employed by Mills teachers and used during the progressive era argue that these educators indoctrinate. They charge, for example, that the social reconstructionists' curriculum emphasizes liberal or left wing critiques of immigration policy, environmental policy, and the capitalist system. In one sense, these concerns have an empirical basis. No Mills students, for example, engaged in a community action project that would be considered politically conservative. Mills teachers, in fact, often struggled with this tension. A "debate" on immigration was retitled a "panel" on immigration after teachers grew concerned that the invited participants did not represent a broad spectrum of perspectives. These concerns lead many educators, including many at Mills, to respond that they aim to be "value free" by presenting "all sides" of a given controversial subject.

This stance, however, fails to resolve the problem and encounters resistance from both the left and the right. A variety of conservative groups, for example, criticize "critical thinking" because they feel it "means teaching children to empty themselves of their own values (transmitted from parents, church, and culture)" (Simonds, 1993/1994, 15). They argue that such curriculum, far from being "value-free," often reflects a form of indoctrination towards "relativistic" and "secular-humanist" values.

On the other hand, social reconstructionists and modern-day criticalists (McLaren and Pruyne, 1996) argue that claims of "value neutrality" often function to obscure the mainstream values (the importance of individual autonomy and the efficacy of market incentives, for example) in which they are embedded. Educators may strive to tell "both sides of the story." They may seek balance or neutrality and hope students will then be free to form their own ideas about issues. But, as George Counts wrote in 1932, "neutrality with respect to the great issues that agitate society ... is practically tantamount to giving support to the most powerful forces engaged in the contest" (1932, 263). False notions of neutrality, Counts argued, can constrain critical thinking by failing to make visible those "social forces" hidden by familiarity. It was this concern that led Dewey, who criticized other aspects of Counts' vision, to praise him nonetheless for making visible the "kind and amount of indoctrination for a reactionary social

order that goes on in the schools" (cited in Graham, 1967, 14).

Furthermore, because the media and the broader culture disproportionately reflects particular interests and perspectives and obscures others, there is no level playing field on which students can discuss issues. Educators must therefore help students consider the interests and power relations embedded in various perspectives -- a formidable task. Such concerns motivated Harold Rugg's curricular focus on the ways various powerful groups shaped the development of institutions which in turn helped shape society. This concern was also evident in Mills' learning challenges where study of "gang violence and ways to prevent it" led students to consider how society might condone and encourage violence through sports and the media. One teacher explained his stance on "value neutrality" this way:

What I'd like students to have is an open mind to things that are different from what they've experienced and an eagerness to find out about it. Not a lack of prejudice necessarily, but an awareness of where their prejudices lie.

In sum, critical thinking in relation to political issues requires attention to situated ideas -- ideas in the context of power relations and cultural norms. Students must learn how to respond to social problems and also how certain problems come to the fore while others remain unnamed. They must learn to evaluate legislative proposals and also the social and political dynamics that favor one proposal over another.

Concluding Thoughts

Reinvigorating the American political system requires that our youngest citizens regain a sense of civic commitment and a belief that they have the capacity to work with others to improve society. A clear vision exists for education that promotes participation and action as well as a keen appreciation of the obstacles educators pursuing this vision face. On the one hand, the importance of this task, and the thought and care with which Mills' teachers and students pursue it, is inspiring. In terms of democratic education, the social reconstructionists' stance may invite more controversy than efforts to validate students' experiences and interests or efforts to simulate the operations of courts and legislatures. But this approach is more exciting, because it is more of a stance: the social reconstructionists, unlike many of their progressive colleagues, provide a vision that aims directly at preparing youth to improve society.

On the other hand, it is doubtful that a significant number of teachers, let alone schools or districts, will pursue this goal. Not only are the talents and commitments necessary to pursue these priorities formidable, but the incentives to bypass these goals are significant. The curricular agenda described earlier breeds controversy, and controversy is not something schools handle well. In part, this is because they are governed democratically. Ironically, the civic community (parents and community members) that governs schools often sanctions those who implement curriculum that engages the contentious issues a civic community must be able to engage for democracy to work. Administrators also work to avoid controversy. When a science class studying levels of radon at Mills discovered levels above the recommended standard, the school district leaders grew concerned, not primarily with the levels of radon, but with the potential

controversy and political pressures such findings might promote.

The policies and practices of teachers, schools, and districts can promote or constrain the degree to which students acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to function effectively as citizens in a democracy. The social reconstructionists and their modern-day colleagues at Mills and elsewhere may lack sufficient answers to important questions, and many roadblocks may constrain implementation of their vision, but they do provide a vision for a school curriculum that encourages participation, critical analysis, and action -- pedagogical prerequisites for democracy and citizenship. These educators offer not only a vision of education for action, but also important strategies for getting there.

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