

Should Social Studies Be Patriotic?

Joel Westheimer

Living now here but for fortune
Placed by fate's mysterious schemes
Who'd believe that we're the ones asked
To try to rekindle the patriot's dream

—Arlo Guthrie, “Patriot’s Dream,” 1976

“*Research & Practice*,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Joel Westheimer, who has edited a book on the politics of patriotism in America’s schools, to help us think about whether and how to teach patriotism as part of social studies education.

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice” Editor,
University of Washington, Seattle

In November of 2001, less than two months after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Nebraska’s state board of education approved a patriotism bill specifying content for the high school social studies curriculum in accordance with the state’s 1949 statute—the Nebraska Americanism law. Social studies, the bill read, should include “instruction in . . . the superiority of the U.S. form of government, the dangers of communism and similar ideologies, the duties of citizenship, and appropriate patriotic exercises.” The board further specified that middle school instruction “should instill a love of country” and that the social studies curriculum should include “exploits and deeds of American heroes, singing patriotic songs, memorizing the ‘Star Spangled Banner’ and ‘America,’ and reverence for the flag.”¹

Nebraska was not alone. Within a few months, more than two dozen state legislatures introduced new bills or resurrected old ones aimed at either encouraging or mandating patriotic exercises for all students in schools. Seventeen states enacted new pledge laws or amended policies in the 2002-03 legislative sessions alone.² Since then more than a dozen additional states have signed on as well. Thirty-five states now require the pledge to be recited daily during the school day. Across the country, state legislatures and even the federal Department of Education have aimed policies at recapturing what many citizens see as a lost sense of pride in America.

What it means to be patriotic, however, is a matter of considerable debate.

Some believe that patriotism requires near-absolute loyalty to government leaders and policies. Others see patriotism as commitment not to the government, but rather to *ideals*: democratic ideals such as equality, compassion, and justice. Still others advocate a healthy skepticism toward governmental actions in general, but prefer to close the ranks during times of war or national crisis. Indeed, there are as many ways to express our commitment to country as there are ways to show our commitment to loved ones or friends.

Nowhere are the debates around the various visions of patriotism more pointed, more protracted, and more consequential than in our schools. In Madison, Wisconsin, the parent community erupted in fierce debate over

a new law requiring schools to post American flags in each classroom and to lead students in either pledging allegiance or listening to the national anthem each day. In Detroit, Michigan, a student was repeatedly suspended, first for wearing a T-shirt with an upside-down American flag and then for wearing a sweatshirt with an antiwar quotation by Albert Einstein, before the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a civil liberties suit resulting in the student’s reinstatement. And in Virginia, House Bill 1912, which would have required schools to notify parents any time a student declined to recite or stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, passed the House of Delegates with a 93–4 vote before being defeated in the State Senate.

As far back as 1890, George Balch, author of *Methods of Teaching Patriotism in Public Schools*, observed that public schools could serve as a “mighty engine for the inculcation of patriotism.”³ But 119 years later, patriotism remains highly contested territory, especially when it comes to the daily activities of schoolchildren. And while the winds of national pride have blown through the classrooms and corridors of the nation’s schools,



Though some were a bit unsure of the words or exactly where to place your hand, some of the 700 students at Nevada Avenue Elementary School recite the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by “God Bless America,” as part of nationwide ceremonies to honor America on October 12, 2001, in the Canoga Park district of Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

social studies educators, in particular, have been at the center of the storm. Public schools in a democratic society have a particular obligation to provide students with opportunities to think deeply about issues of public importance. So it is fitting to ask, What and how should schools teach students about patriotism? How can they best prepare students to participate in the civic life of their community and nation? To be able to answer those questions, it makes sense first to get clear about what precisely we mean when we talk about patriotism.

Two Kinds of Patriotism

If you stepped into a school at a moment of patriotic expression, how could you tell whether you were in a totalitarian nation or a democratic one? Both the totalitarian nation and the democratic one might have students sing a national anthem. You might hear a hip-hip-hooray

kind of cheer for our land emanating from the assembly hall of either school. Flags and symbols of national pride might be front and center in each school. And the students of each school might observe a moment of silence for members of their country’s armed forces who had been killed in combat.

But how would the lessons on patriotism in the democratic nation be unique? What should schools in the United States ask students to consider that schools in China, North Korea, or Iran would not? I want to propose two ways to think about patriotism—*authoritarian* and *democratic*—that highlight the potential dangers and benefits of teaching about it in schools (see Table 1). Although both authoritarian and democratic patriotism might employ familiar rituals to foster a sense of belonging and attachment, authoritarian patriotism asks for unquestioning loyalty to a centralized leader

or leading group. Since such patriotism demands allegiance to the government’s cause, it also most often stands in opposition to any form of dissent. We would not be surprised to learn, for example, that North Korean children are taught to abide by an “official history” handed down by President Kim Jong-il and his single-party regime. Political scientist Douglas Lummis notes that authoritarian patriotism represents “a resigning of one’s will, right of choice, and need to understand to the authority; its emotional base is gratitude for having been liberated from the burden of democratic responsibility.”⁴ A school curriculum that teaches one unified, unquestioned version of “truth” is one of the hallmarks of authoritarian patriotism—and of a totalitarian society.

One would reasonably expect to see a different picture in U.S. schools. Democratic patriotism entails com-

Table 1. **The Politics of Patriotism**

| | Authoritarian Patriotism | Democratic Patriotism |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Ideology | <p>Belief that one's country is inherently superior to others.</p> <p>Primary allegiance to land, birthright, legal citizenship, and government's cause.</p> <p>Non-questioning loyalty.</p> <p>Follow leaders reflexively, support them unconditionally.</p> <p>Blind to shortcomings and social discord within nation.</p> <p>Conformist; dissent seen as dangerous and destabilizing.</p> | <p>Belief that one's country's ideals are worthy of admiration and respect.</p> <p>Primary allegiance to principles that underlie democracy.</p> <p>Questioning, critical, deliberative loyalty.</p> <p>Care for the people of society based on particular principles (e.g., liberty, justice).</p> <p>Outspoken in condemnation of shortcomings, especially within nation.</p> <p>Respectful of, even encouraging of, dissent.</p> |
| Slogans | My country, right or wrong. America: love it or leave it. | Dissent is patriotic. You have the right to NOT remain silent. |
| Historical Example | McCarthy Era House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) proceedings, which reinforced the idea that dissenting views are anti-American and unpatriotic. | The fiercely patriotic testimony of Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, and others before HUAC admonishing the committee for straying from American principles of democracy and justice. |
| Contemporary Example | Equating opposition to the war in Iraq with "hatred" of America or support for terrorism. | Reinforcing American principles of equality, justice, tolerance, and civil liberties, especially during national times of crisis. |

mitment not necessarily to government leaders, but rather to the people, principles, and values that underlie democracy—such as political participation, free speech, civil liberties, and political equality. This does not mean that democratic patriots leave no room for symbolic displays of support and solidarity. Few would argue with the power of symbols. But democratic patriotism seeks to ensure that “liberty and justice for all” serves not only as a slogan for America but also as a guiding principle for policies, programs, and laws that affect Americans. Schools might develop students’ democratic patriotism, at least in part, through lessons in analysis and exploration, free political expression, and

independent thought. And U.S. schools often support democratic dispositions in just such ways.

But American schools also have a long history of implication in projects of authoritarian forms of patriotism. Indeed teachers and administrators were often enlisted to encourage students’ unquestioning support of national and foreign policies. During wartime, in particular, American schools have tended to adopt an unquestioning stance towards citizenship. As Stephan Brumberg details in his portrayal of New York City schools’ participation in fostering patriotism during World War I, when the United States went to war, so too did its public schools.⁵ For example, immediately following the

declaration of war, the New York City Board of Education moved to ensure that all teachers demonstrate “unqualified allegiance” to administration policies by signing the following statement:

We, the undersigned teachers in the public schools of the City of New York, declare our unqualified allegiance to the government of the United States of America, and pledge ourselves by word and example to teach and impress upon our pupils the duty of loyal obedience and patriotic service, as the highest ideal of American citizenship.⁶

“Loyal obedience,” to be sure, left little room for dissent or debate about foreign policy. More significantly for schools, however, the educational implications were clear: a patriotic citizen is one who does not question or critically explore government policy.

This history along with post-9/11 efforts to stifle dissent (recall former White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer’s admonition to the American public to “watch what they say and watch what they do”) leads to justifiable concerns. Indeed, many educators—myself among them—are more comfortable with the idea that it is important to teach *about* patriotism than to demand patriotic fidelity. The latter, it is feared, too easily leads to what philosopher Martha Nussbaum warns is “perilously close to jingoism.”⁷ The former, however, is an exercise in critical engagement with important American ideals.

Teaching Democratic Patriotism

There are many varied and powerful ways to teach a democratic form of patriotism aimed at both critical consideration of the history, present, and future of our society as well as at reinforcing the ideals of improving the country and the lives of its inhabitants. For example, longtime teacher Brian Schultz’s inspiring efforts with his fifth-grade class in Chicago’s Cabrini-Green housing project area

included having his students conduct research on improving conditions in their own neighborhood, especially with regard to broken promises to build a new school. His students studied historical approaches to change and, rejecting passivity, demonstrated a deep attachment to their community and neighbors.⁸

Bob Peterson, a Wisconsin Elementary Teacher of the Year, worked with his students at La Escuela Fratney in Madison to examine the full spectrum of ideological positions that emerged following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Instead of avoiding the challenging questions his fifth-grade students posed, Peterson encouraged them, placing a notebook prominently at the front of the classroom labeled “Questions That We Have.” As the students discussed their questions and the unfolding current events, Peterson repeatedly asked students to consider their responsibilities to one another, to their communities, and to the world. Through poetry (Langston Hughes’s “Let America Be America Again”); historical readings (the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the 1918 Sedition Act); and current events (photographs of September 11 memorial gatherings, protests in the United States and abroad, newspaper editorials), Peterson allowed students to explore political events surrounding the September 11 attacks and their effect on American patriotism and democracy.⁹

El Puente Academy in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, ties the entire school curriculum to students’ and teachers’ concerns about the community. A New York City School of Excellence, El Puente boasts a 90 percent graduation rate in an area where schools usually see only 50 percent of their students graduate in four years. El Puente principal Héctor Calderón attributes the school’s success to a curriculum that engages students in efforts to realize American ideals of justice and equality, reverse the cycle of poverty and violence, and work toward change



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in their own neighborhood. Students study environmental hazards in the area, not only because they care about the health of the natural environment, but also because these hazards directly affect the health of the community to which they are deeply committed. In one unit, students surveyed the community to chart levels of asthma and identify families affected by the disease. Their report became the first by a community organization to be published in a medical journal. Students and teachers also successfully fought a 55-story incinerator that was proposed for their neighborhood.

These approaches to teaching about patriotism share several characteristics. First, teachers encourage students to ask questions rather than absorb pat answers—to think about their attachments and commitments to their local, national, and global communities. Second, teachers provide students with the information (including competing narratives) they need to think about patriotism in substantive ways. Third, they root instruction in local contexts, working within their own specific surroundings and circumstances. Why? Because we cannot teach democratic patriotism without paying attention to the environment in which we are teaching it. This last point makes standardized testing difficult to reconcile with in-depth thinking about patriotism.

Conclusion

There is evidence that many students are learning well the lessons of authoritarian patriotism. A poll of California high school students found that 43 percent of high school seniors, having completed courses in U.S. history and U.S. government, either agreed with or were neutral toward the statement “It is un-American to criticize this country.”¹⁰ A Pew Research Center poll in 2003 found that 92 percent of respondents agreed either completely or mostly with the statement “I am very patriotic” but another poll showed that nearly a third of Americans believe that those who

attended protests against U.S. military involvement in Iraq are “unpatriotic.”¹¹

How are we to understand this? Do Americans fluctuate between feelings of democratic patriotism and my-country-right-or-wrong jingoism? Do we want to embrace principles of free speech and diversity of ideas yet turn aggressively nationalistic when it comes to matters of foreign policy and war? I suspect our collective mélange of patriotic emotions is more complicated than that. The twentieth-century British writer G.K. Chesterton is often invoked for his familiar quip that declaring “my country right or wrong” is like saying “my mother, drunk or sober.” And yet, most of us—regardless of the kind of patriotism, if any, we endorse—would agree that, in ways perhaps fraught and complex, we would stand by our mother when sober, yes, but also when intoxicated. We might tell her to stop drinking. We might get her an appointment at rehab. We would certainly express disgust with her conduct. But still, there we would stand, by her side.

Psychologist Michael Bader argues that the emotional and psychological roots of patriotism can be found in the universal need for attachment and affiliation.¹² We all want to belong and to know that our lives have meaning—and that we are part of something larger than ourselves. This is a point that educators across the political spectrum can agree on. But translating that sentiment into curriculum opens a Pandora’s Box of questions and pedagogical tensions. For social studies educators it would be easiest to avoid the controversy altogether. But that would be a mistake. Students need to learn about the contentious debates with which adults struggle and prepare to take part in them. There are as many ways of showing one’s commitment to country as there are games at the Olympics. But democracy is not a spectator sport. 🇺🇸

Notes

1. Nebraska State Board of Education, Board Minutes, 1-2 November 2001 (revised following 7 December 2001 meeting).

2. Jennifer Piscatelli, “Pledge of Allegiance,” *State Notes: Character and Civic Education*, Education Commission of the States, August 2003.
3. George Balch, *Methods of Teaching Patriotism in Public Schools* (1890). Cited in Cecilia O’Leary *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 175.
4. C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 37.
5. Stephan F. Brumberg, “New York City Schools March Off to War: The Nature and Extent of Participation of the City Schools in the Great War: April 1917-June 1918,” *Urban Education* 24, no. 4 (1990): 440-475.
6. New York City Board of Education, *Journal of the Board of Education of the City of New York*, Vols. I, II (New York: Anchor, 1917), 540. Cited in Brumberg, 446.
7. Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2002), 29.
8. Brian D. Schultz, *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).
9. Bob Peterson, “La Escuela Fratney: A Journey toward Democracy,” *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education*, eds. Michael Apple and James Beane (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2007), 30-61.
10. Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, “Is Patriotism Good for Democracy?” in *Pledging Allegiance* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), 115-125.
11. Pew Research Center survey, “The 2004 Political Landscape: Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized,” November 2003. Available at: peoplepress.org/dataarchive/; Dennis Gilbert, “Hamilton College Patriotism Poll: Eleven Key Findings,” March 20, 2003, Question 17, Appendix, 7. Available at www.hamilton.edu/levitt/surveys/patriotism/patriotismreport.pdf.
12. Michael J. Bader, “The Psychology of Patriotism,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 87, no. 8 (2006), 582-584.

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