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Letter from the Editors

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What is it that social studies education should do? This question is not new, nor is the use of instruction to restrict human thought and action. We live in a society where existing power and capital are perpetuated in ways that ensure the perception of equality under the law while creating and maintaining extreme human hierarchies. Such extreme disparity is a shameful reality in a democracy; however, educational debates have been central to political conversations that continue to ensure a democratic system without democracy.

The history of educational thought following the Great Depression does not resemble current conversation but demonstrates how educational thought arrived in the present moment. Reconstructionists like Counts (1932/1978) argued that the country required a “new social order based upon democratic social justice and a fundamental redistribution of economic and political power.” He suggested that the spirit of Democracy was “fundamentally lost in a capitalist system.” We can observe this today in the value placed on capital and the access it provides. The result is neglect for humans, dehumanizing those without wealth or who have had their

labor stolen in everyday interaction, and a focus on profit, which has reduced democratic participation apart from that which capital can provide. Reconstructionists argued that educators and curriculum should serve to attack these anti-democratic social, political, and economic elements and that education should be the tool by which citizens can more easily become informed and engage in democratic action to promote social welfare (Freire, 1970).

The Progressives or Pragmatists argued for teaching the tools to exist within a democracy. Dewey (1933), for example, argued that citizens be trained in a “method of intelligence” to “provide students with the critical competence for reflective thought applied to the analysis of social problems.” Teachers in this approach are responsible for “assisting in social change” and “taking part in their execution to be educative.” These visions are foundational to current notions of civics education. However, they are not often practiced and are, in some contexts, discarded in favor of lousy faith, didactic learning, and attacks on ideas that might provide a more democratic society.

Conservative educational approaches had a

proud tradition of resisting anti-government oppressive oversight. Unfortunately, much of the anti-government sentiment has become folded into a system that provides legitimacy for unaccountable private power (Chomsky, 2011). Conservatives now call individualism and freedom “free market theory,” attacking government power supportive of private power that is more often more oppressive than governmental power and unaccountable for their negative impacts on society. This focus on private power has helped the economic elite control the public sphere, allowing those with the means to consolidate, secure, and use their power through the private sphere (Giroux, 2003; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Attacks on CRT and approaches to education focusing on free thought are, interestingly, disenfranchising the individuals most impacted by what “so-called” Conservatives contemporary are trying to do.

Democratic Realists believed that people should be educated to become societal functionaries. Many argue that critical analysis of social problems is beyond the cognitive capacity of most K-12 students (Posner, 2003). In the Madisonian tradition, educational thinking should remain with the “boy of best repute” and the power given to a better sort of leader (e.g., Madison to “ensure the opulence of the minority”) (Chomsky, 1998). This approach appears to be the thinking that currently exists. We can see the differences in educational experiences and supports focused on students’ well-being across elite boarding and Title 1 schools. Sure, students are trained to be the masters of men and others to be laborers. A

democratic realist approach has ensured that teachers and citizens, in the minds of those in power, should not be intellectuals because of the danger it poses to their power. Instead, functionaries will be trained to accept and further status quo thinking. In this way, education has served as part of one of the great propaganda machines, creating a social ideology in which we cannot see ourselves apart. In sum, these ideas continue to be foundational to understanding the purpose and possibilities of the Civics and Social Studies curriculum.

That political ideologies shape the nature of education, and that education becomes a battleground for political ideologies is nothing new. Social studies, in particular, has spaces where these battles have become particularly fierce since it is where ideas about democracy, social justice, and social organization unfold. This curricular and social thought history is deeply embedded in these conversations, where theorists have debated what society should be and, in turn, what social studies should do. Should social studies be a space for cultural transmission or transformation (Evans, 2000; Stanley, 2015)? People outside social studies often make contemporary decisions about education and social studies. In Texas, conversations have become hyper-partisan, threatening freedom of thought, with ideologies asserting that conversations of difference are somehow truth.

Society pushes that conversations regarding religion and politics should be taboo, especially in the social studies classroom (Evans et al., 2000). We are socialized to believe that discussing

controversial topics is uncomfortable, and we should avoid being uncomfortable at all costs. Furthermore, for some time, schools have been victims of antiseptic desensitization by de-emphasizing the emotional nature of education (Zinn, 1994). So, the question becomes: Is this even feasible in a social studies classroom? Many undergraduate and graduate social studies methods courses introduce or elaborate on the National Council for Social Studies and their Ten Thematic Strands, which push forward a more civically and critically engaged form of social studies. According to this strand, “an understanding of civic ideals and practices is critical to full participation in society and is an essential component of education for citizenship, which is the central purpose of social studies” (National Council for The Social Studies, 2002, paragraph 1). Upon initial reading, most of the descriptors suggest a study of or an understanding of the concepts of civic participation. However, at one point in the description, NCSS clarifies that “students learn by experience how to participate in community service and political activities and how to use democratic processes to influence public policy” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2002, paragraph 3).

Social studies educators rely on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills in Texas. For each grade level, there is a scaffolded strand dedicated to citizenship. A kindergartner might practice how to use voting as a method for group decision-making (§113.11(b)(9)(C)). A sixth grader might learn to identify and explain the duty of civic participation in societies with representative governments (§113.18(b)

(12)(A)). A high school student enrolled in the United States Government course analyzes historical and contemporary examples (§113.44(b)(14)(B)). Even selecting one course randomly from elementary, middle level, and secondary demonstrates that students are tasked with unpacking complicated material and can be allowed to actively participate in these processes.

So what happens when our teachers are bombarded with aggressive, sometimes violent, often misinformed threats from their students, the community, and even their government? The Journal for Social Studies and History Education editors suggest that we press onward.

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