

Global Insights for U.S. Civic Education

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South African educators confer during a Facing History workshop on the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. (Courtesy of Shikaya)

Beneath the renewed focus on civic education in American schools is a deep sense of unease. A recent report from the Democracy Project found that “confidence in our governing institutions has been weakening over many years, and key pillars of our democracy, including the rule of law and freedom of the press, are under strain.”¹ In the recently published book *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*, Yascha Mounk traces the crisis of liberal democracy and the rise of populism to rising inequality, tensions around national identity and belonging, and the revolutionary power of social media. Young Americans, he writes, are particularly skeptical of democracy. How should teachers approach civic education in this difficult climate?

This environment pushes us to think bigger about civic education. The structures and processes of democratic governance—and the idea of “citizen power”—are as important as ever. (As the title of one book puts it, “freedom is an endless meeting.”²) But the inequality and divisions undermining democracy can’t be fixed by better meetings alone; young

people also need to learn to be ethical and inclusive citizens with a sense of a common good.

While we’ve traditionally treated civic education as an issue of distinctly national concern—after all, each country has its own structures of government and notions of citizenship—we can also look outside the United States for important

insights. This is particularly true now as it’s become clear that the democratic decline we are experiencing in the United States is part of a larger global trend. As American teachers consider how to meet the challenge of this moment, the experience of educators in other countries can inform, inspire, and enlarge our own approach to civic education.

At our recent Global Summit on Education and Democracy in Northern Ireland,³ we brought together educational leaders from 10 countries. Some came from places with deep democratic traditions, like Australia and the Netherlands, while others represented newer democracies like South Africa and the Czech Republic, or societies emerging from periods of violent conflict like Colombia and Northern Ireland itself. Each of these countries reflects, in its own way, significant challenges to liberal democracy and reminds us that the sense of the fragility of democracy felt by many in the United States is a global concern.

South Africa and Northern Ireland offer particular insights for American teachers interested in extending their practice of civic education. Following critical transitions in both countries in the 1990s, educators, policymakers, and NGOs looked to schools as a place where society might be repaired and democracy rooted. The decade saw the end of apartheid in South Africa and the country’s efforts to transform a system of white-supremacist, authoritarian minority rule into a multicultural democracy. In Northern Ireland, decades of deadly sectarian

conflict known as “the Troubles” officially ended in 1998 with a negotiated political settlement, the Good Friday Agreement. In the aftermath of these political transitions, both countries have created education policies that are progressive, even visionary, though the gap between policy and practice can be significant. And they, like us, continue to wrestle with the legacies of their past.

The particular histories of South Africa and Northern Ireland have led teachers there to approach education for democracy differently.⁴ Sean Pettis trains teachers throughout Northern Ireland and leads the Legacies of Conflict program at the Corrymeela Community, a peace and reconciliation organization. Dylan Wray and Roy Hellenberg, of the education nonprofit Shikaya, work with teachers and school leaders to transform schools across South Africa. These educators combine a clear-eyed recognition of the challenges their societies face with deep knowledge of local schools and a commitment to preparing young people for engaged, empathic citizenship grounded in a sense of the common good.

Their work, detailed below, suggests that attending to relationships and culture, intentionally cultivating community across social divisions, and teaching a country’s own difficult history nurture habits of mind and heart that are essential to democracies everywhere.

Education for Democracy Starts with Teachers

Representative democracy is new to both Northern Ireland and South Africa, so many of the educators charged with preparing students for democratic citizenship didn’t grow up with democracy themselves. Sean Pettis explains that Northern Ireland struggles with a “democratic deficit,” the result of decades of direct rule from London and a violent climate that discouraged civic engagement: “All this means that for our teachers, especially those that are older, none of us really have the experience of what it means to live in a healthy, vibrant democracy.... So in some senses, it becomes a

hypothetical rather than a real lived experience.”

Adding to this challenge is the fact that teachers carry the legacies of their countries’ histories—including sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland and racial oppression in South Africa. In *A School Where I Belong: Creating Transformed and Inclusive South African Schools*, Roy Hellenberg and Dylan Wray, and co-author Jonathan Jansen, write, “It is hard to be an adult who grew up during the Apartheid era in South Africa and not still carry some of its dust.” Most teachers, they say, “were not trained and supported to move from a racially divided system into one that sees everyone as equal. They were not supported to transform within a transforming education system.”⁵

At educator workshops and school-based professional development sessions, teachers therefore begin with an exploration of how their identities have been shaped by their country’s past. Sean Pettis says,

It always begins with the educator. To what extent has the teacher explored their own values and beliefs in relation to the big issues? For me it works best when it’s done together, in a sustained way. The most successful project will be where the teachers have thought about these issues, together [across communities], and they are up for making mistakes, going on a journey themselves.

At Wray and Hellenberg’s workshops, teachers read stories written by South Africans living under apartheid as an entry point to reflection and conversation about their own stories. A participant observed, “...if we’re not critically looking at how it is that who we are influences what we teach, then we’re just perpetuating either hatred, maybe indifference towards the other, whoever they are, and then how do we possibly create a new way of being?”⁶

How might this kind of teacher reflection support better education for democracy in the United States? Educators here may not self-consciously see themselves as part of a project of national transformation. Yet we can benefit from understanding how our own identities and stories relate to tensions that divide the country and often our classrooms. Doing so will help us better embody the democratic values of openness, inclusivity, and respect that are a crucial, though often unremarked, part of an effective civic education. As Roy Hellenberg argues,

How can I expect learners to make themselves vulnerable and expose their ideas to criticism if I am not willing to do the same myself? How can I encourage my learners to become active citizens and challenge the people and practices that undermine democracy, and then fail to take any action myself in the face of injustice?.... Can we really tackle xenophobic violence when we turn a blind eye to bullying on the playground? Can we fight for a more accountable government if teachers at our own schools are not called to account? Teaching democratic values is not contained in a series of lessons; it is a lifestyle, an ethos that one creates in classrooms and the school as a whole.⁷

Build School Culture and Focus on Relationships

Teaching for democracy is about much more than delivering the right curriculum. As John Dewey said, democracy is “the idea of community life itself.”⁸ Schools are the first community to which many children consciously belong and sometimes the first place where they encounter democratic institutions. In the United States, public schools have long had the task of transmitting national identity. What might schools do today to build civic trust and belonging in a time of cynicism and public rancor?

In South Africa, Dylan Wray and Roy Hellenberg urge school leaders to think very intentionally about how the national transition to a democratic system is visible—or not—in their own communities:

We can't ignore the fact that our schools, filled with young people born into a democracy, are run by adults who have come from an authoritarian background and have been part of a system that silenced voices. Most schools are still authoritarian environments, where young people are controlled, are told how they should dress, what hairstyles they are allowed, and how they must behave and speak.... Much has been written about and in support of the South African school curriculum, which talks about schools as democratic spaces. But have the majority of schools really made the time and taken the risk to deliberately sit down together and ask how democracy happens in our schools?⁹

They encourage schools to undertake a thorough review of governance structures, codes of conduct, and community traditions and align them with core democratic values, something American schools could also consider. Involving students in this process would be a valuable civic education in itself.

Relationships are another foundation of civic education in schools. Duncan Morrow, a professor and leader in community relations and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, argues that “to pay attention to the quality of democracy we want to have, we need to attend to the quality of relationships in our community.” In Northern Ireland, over 90 percent of students attend Catholic or Protestant schools and more than 90 percent of social housing is segregated. This seg-

regation has inhibited civic development and a sense of a shared future.

Cross-communal work in Northern Ireland offers a powerful model for us to learn from. Sean Pettis observes, “Anecdotally and in our research on educating in divided societies, one of the challenges [of segregated school systems] is that you can learn *about* the other but you're not learning *with* the other, who-

“In South Africa, Northern Ireland, and the United States, teachers have found a way into difficult conversations about historical legacies by beginning with a topic that feels more distant and therefore somewhat safer.”

ever the ‘other’ may be. And that has a profound effect.... Deep learning is relational, so if you're not in relationship, where's the depth?”

The residential programs at the Corrymeela Community, which bring students and teachers of different backgrounds together for a shared learning experience, help to foster these relationships. The United States also has high levels of school-based and residential segregation and many of us exist inside invisible bubbles created by our media choices and reinforced by the homogenous communities where we live. Often, our schools are inside those bubbles too. Teachers can intentionally create bridges across communities, sometimes by connecting students through pen-pal projects (or cross-communal student activities, like the Memphis student leadership group, detailed in “Youth in Front: Supporting Youth-Led Social Action” in

this issue of *Social Education*), or by participating in professional development that includes a diverse group of educators and develops peer relationships, and by thinking about how they integrate different voices and experiences into their curriculum. In a climate where many want to exploit divisions for political gain, such connections are a safeguard of pluralism and democracy.

Facing the Past

Bringing educators and students into relationship is a start, but once connected, they have to be able to engage with each other on the difficult issues that are at the heart of social divisions. When a country is emerging from a period of conflict, there is often avoidance and silence around issues that matter most. This has been the case in Northern Ireland. “The sectarian environment creates a kind of reticence—like in the Seamus Heaney poem ‘Whatever you say, say nothing,’” Sean Pettis says. “That reticence permeates all of society and teachers come from the society, so it's no wonder that it's carried into the classroom.” As the partisan climate in the United States has heated up over the last two years, many educators here report that they're choosing not to discuss politics, teach current events, or engage with difficult issues for fear of how students, parents, or administrators will react. The experience of schools in Northern Ireland suggests that such avoidance isn't the answer: It can disempower students as citizens, because they don't learn to address the conflicts that shape their society.

In countries where, as Duncan Morrow puts it, “the biggest impediment to the future is the past,” teaching history might seem to be an unlikely avenue to building peace and democracy today. But the civic life students are preparing for doesn't exist in a vacuum: It is always shaped by a community's and country's past and its legacies. Students need an understanding of that history to make wise and ethical civic choices within that community. This is a foundational belief

of Facing History and Ourselves and central to our work in the United States and globally.

In South Africa, Northern Ireland, and the United States, teachers have found a way into difficult conversations about historical legacies by beginning with a topic that feels more distant and therefore somewhat safer. For example, educators in both South Africa and Northern Ireland report that teaching the U.S. civil rights movement is a generative entry point. Its distance from their own history makes it feel safer, but the questions it raises gently invite young people to reflect on issues of belonging, power, and decision-making in their own context. This allows students—and their adult teachers—to make connections to their own contexts as well as distinctions, to identify patterns, and to begin to talk about things that they have learned to avoid.

While distant case studies provide a way in, the learning does not stop there. Teachers must also address their societ-

ies' primary conflicts and their legacies, integrating history and civic education to give students the tools to understand, empathize, and engage. William Hastie, the first African American federal judge in the United States, observed that “Democracy is a process, not a static condition. It is becoming rather than being. It can easily be lost, but never is fully won. Its essence is eternal struggle.” So perhaps it makes sense that countries that have recently been living this struggle towards democracy have much to teach us in the United States. These practices from Northern Ireland and South Africa suggest a holistic approach to educating for democracy that is fundamentally about bridging gaps and making connections: not only between past and present, but also between self and other, teacher and student, school and society. They suggest how teachers and schools can kindle an elusive but essential quality of democratic citizenship: a sense of the common good. 🌍

Notes

1. The Democracy Project, *Reversing a Crisis of Confidence*, www.democracyprojectreport.org/report#paragraph-85.
2. Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
3. The summit was convened by Facing History and Ourselves. My colleagues and I at Facing History have longstanding partnerships with schools, teachers, and local non-governmental organizations in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and beyond.
4. Facing History and Ourselves has worked in both countries since 2003, in partnership with local leaders and organizations.
5. Dylan Wray, Roy Hellenberg, and Jonathan Jansen, *A School Where I Belong: Creating Transformed and Inclusive South African Schools* (Bookstorm, 2018), 29, 32.
6. *Ibid.*, 31.
7. *Ibid.*, 185.
8. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (1927) (Penn State Press, 2012).
9. Wray, Hellenberg, and Jansen, *A School Where I Belong*, 130–131.

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