

**American Identity Development and Citizenship Education: A Summary of
Perspectives and Call for New Research**

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The articles in this special issue emanate from a dire concern about the evolving state of American society: that community, civility, and democratic values are on the decline, while divisiveness, hostility, and extreme forms of individualism are on the rise. The fabric of democratic American society is coming undone before our eyes. What does this mean for educators and developmental scientists? The imperative for those of us who are eminently concerned with the development and education of youth cuts two ways. First, we need to be concerned with how the state of American society impacts young people's development as citizens, and recognize that many youth are at risk of developing identities as disempowered and disenfranchised citizens because of the current status of American civic life. Second, because it is within this context that young people are becoming community members, voters, and potential civic and national leaders, we must also consider what the current state of youth civic and national identity development means for the future of American society.

Extensive prior research has examined civic development and education among young people. We know that youth civic participation, especially political participation, is disappointing (e.g., Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter & Zukin, 2002; Levine, 2007). We know that schools are an important resource for developing civic identity but are not living up to their promise in that regard (e.g., Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; Torney-Purta,

2002; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002) and we know that there is a troubling civic education and participation gap between college-bound and non-college-bound youth (e.g., Levinson, 2007; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Flanagan, Levine & Settersten, 2009). While much has been learned through research efforts, it is now critical that innovative ways for examining these problems are found.

By focusing on American identity, the articles in this issue forge a new approach to examining the pressing issue of youth civic development. Political scientists argue that attachment to national identity is key to developing democratic citizenship and civic participation (Bogard & Sherrod, 2008; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), however, development of national identity in America is not a straightforward proposition. Recent trends in American public life that are implicated in the deterioration of community and civility described above are also to blame for declining attachment among Americans to the ideas that define America as a nation. These ideas gave shape to a way of life that is cherished and envied throughout the world, yet their significance has become hazy or even contentious for many Americans, making attachment to American identity problematic. Consequently, the articles in this issue have produced more questions than answers. It is our hope that the ideas presented in this issue can serve as a catalyst for future work by developmental scientists and educators who are concerned with youth civic development.

We believe that the need to understand and support youth development of American identity is urgent. If we, as educators and developmental scientists, fail to inspire youth to sustain the important ideas that American democracy depends on, then American society as we know it will cease to exist. Because this is a problem that resides

not only in developmental science, but cuts across several social science disciplines, the questions that were explored in this issue were not confined to developmental inquiry. Some of the questions that were addressed are: What does it mean to be American and have American identity? What is the current status of the ideas that America was founded on, such as liberty, equality, and E Pluribus Unum, and how have they evolved since the founding of the country? And, how do young people in America develop civic and national identity? Also in this issue, we asked about civic education in America: What is the role of education in resolving the problems of American identity? And, how do we educate young people for American citizenship given the current status of American society? This conclusion summarizes some of the important ideas that emerged in response to these questions, and begins the process of considering how these ideas can inform a new paradigm in research on citizenship, civic identity formation, and civic participation.

Perspectives on American Identity

American identity was examined in this issue in two important ways. First, the historical and philosophical perspective on American identity was considered. America is not founded on geographical or ancestral grounds, but on a set of political ideas that have taken shape over centuries. As the shape of American society shifts through the years, discussing American identity requires that we remember the fundamentally valued ideas that guided the founding of the country, and acknowledge that being an American, for many, means striving to uphold those ideas. From a historical perspective, American identity is reference to those important values and ideals that the country was founded on, and that are worth sustaining. The national identity of American citizens, from that

perspective, is a matter of how individuals attach to those ideals. As Sullivan argued in this issue, attachment to the important founding ideals of America has faltered in recent decades, as evidenced in the shift in American society toward radical individualism and away from community values that are vital to sustaining a free and democratic society.

With this historical perspective as a foundation, this issue turned to the social and psychological meaning of identity, to examine what it means to become American in contemporary society. Social conditions in America determine that young people are having very diverse experiences, which impacts how they will develop American identity. Spencer argued that there are profound differences of experience in American society, and there must, therefore, be not one but many different American identities. Likewise, Jahromi demonstrated that young people in America are having different local experiences that shape how they think about their own American identity. Young people, according to Jahromi, might be skeptical of a unified American identity because the diversity of American society makes such a singular identity irrelevant. In her commentary, Deaux brought up the diverse and growing immigrant population, and what their diverse experiences and acculturation mean for American identity. The social and psychological perspective makes evident that there is not a single, unified American identity.

It is important, therefore, to gain some clarity about what the ultimate goal is in striving to develop national identity among American youth. It cannot be a singular vision, a narrowing vision, or one that forces a particular national vision onto individuals. Arguments have been put forth about the different types of citizen that would best sustain democracy and American society, and in these arguments lay the question of what sort of

American identity should be cultivated in individuals. Westheimer and Kahne (2004), for example, suggested that at least three different types of citizen should be recognized: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice oriented citizen. More recently, Rubin (2007) developed four civic identity typologies that can be used to describe youth: aware, empowered, complacent, and discouraged. While these types are just examples of ways that individuals participate in civic life, they indicate that being and participating as an American means different things to different people, and that different ways of being American are important for sustaining American society.

Building on the idea of pluralistic democratic citizenship, the articles in this issue converge on the need for developmental research and education in a new paradigm that strives for a positive, constructive, and fluid identification with the ideas that are the foundation of America. Positive refers to a hope for society, that we can work to enable all young people to have positive experiences with ideals such as democracy, equality, and justice. Constructive refers to helping young people to identify with America such that they are empowered to be engaged and active citizens, not only in ways that are governmentally sanctioned, but also through social critique and protest. Fluid refers to the recognition that the identity of America as a nation must co-evolve with the identity of the individuals that live in American society—not that the founding ideals of the country should be forgotten over time, but that they might be examined and brought to life in different ways by different groups and different generations of Americans. Developing American identity is not, then, a matter of urging young people to attach blindly to these ideas as they have been handed down through time. Instead, it is about enabling youth to

find inspiration and strength in these ideas to in order that they might fully integrate who they are with who *we* are in mutually constructive ways.

Civic Education

Ideally, education would play a vital role in developing citizenship and healthy national identity among all youth in America, and the research recounted in this volume by Youniss, Benninga, and Quinn demonstrates that civic education has been a topic of primary interest among developmental scientists concerned with youth civic engagement. This research indicates that educational methods that focus on democratic participation are successful at developing citizenship. For example, methods that engage young people in civic-like activity, such as service learning and discussions of political issues, are strong predictors of civic knowledge, participation, and commitment (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Shulz, 2001; Kahne & Spote, 2008). This research also indicates that school environment and structured opportunities provided by schools matter. For example, schools that commit to character education provide an educational environment where adults model democratic practices, which fosters students' sense of America as a fair and just society and encourages positive civic behaviors (Benninga & Quinn, this issue). As Quinn (this issue) argued, schools need to function as models of democratic society if they are to foster American identity and active democratic citizenship in young people. In terms of opportunities that schools provide for young people, the research shows that participation in youth organizations and student government are predictors of adult voting and participation in voluntary civic organizations (Youniss, this issue). In summary, the research to date indicates that an effective civic education develops habits

of democratic attitude and participation that are carried forward into adult civic and political activities.

However, as the articles in this issue have suggested, there are numerous challenges that limit the implementation and effectiveness of good civic education practices. At the policy level, Benninga and Quinn argued that education leadership has lost sight of the role that schools play in preparing young people for democratic citizenship. Instead, leaders have redefined schools as being primarily places where students learn basic academic skills, and where the foremost goal is to close the academic achievement gap. This emphasis on academic basics and away from citizenship preparation at the policy level has a dramatic impact in classrooms, as instructional time and funding are allocated according to the goals set by education leaders. Although substantive social studies standards are in place, there is no support from the policy level to implement them, they are not assessed, and in fact they are discouraged by rigid accountability in the more basic academic areas such as language arts and math. Even if it is widely agreed that citizenship can be fostered through certain types of educational methods and programs, the policy environment in American education today inhibits the implementation of such programs.

By focusing attention and resources on the academic achievement gap, education policymakers are perpetuating a civic education gap between college-bound and non-college-bound youth that contributes to deepening social inequities. The low-performing schools that operate with the most stringent academic accountability requirements are the same schools that are populated by non-college-bound youth. As a result, non-college-bound youth are increasingly alienated from political process because they are not as

well-prepared as their college-bound peers to participate in and benefit from the political process. These young people are caught in a cycle in which poor civic education and negative experiences in society reinforce each other. Limited civic education contributes to reduced civic participation and disenfranchisement from the democratic process, and as a result they are more likely than their college-bound peers to have negative and inequitable experiences in society and conflicted associations with American identity.

Spencer alluded to additional challenges in providing civic education due to the very different experiences that young people are having in society, suggesting that educating for plural civic identities in America is complex. Along with the policy level challenges just described, she argued that student learning in the civics classroom is made problematic by the types of interactions that occur between students and teachers about historical and contemporary American society. The research she cited found that educators are afraid to interact with their students about the complicated issues that make up our society and their lives. So although the research on civic education indicates that discussion and debate about controversial political topics is important to civic development, research also suggests that teachers are reluctant to engage youth from different backgrounds in these types of discussions in the classroom.

A third challenging aspect of civic education that was discussed in this issue relates to the ideas that are at the foundation of America the nation, and how young people are educated about those ideas. Spencer argued that what students learn about the history of America through the civics curriculum is a distortion of the truth. This is in part because adults have not been reflective about their own experiences as Americans, and consequently have a distorted understanding of American history. Furthermore, the

evolution of American society means that the story of America has changed, the American dream has changed (Delbanco, 1999), the meaning of the events and lives that make up American history has evolved, and the structure of American civil society has been transformed by this evolution of ideas (Sullivan, this issue). Given this ongoing transformation of ideas in American society, and the distorted nature of the histories that are told to pass on those ideas, how can we educate young people about the identity of America in ways that will enable them to develop the will and desire to sustain America as a free and democratic society?

Implications for Research and Education Practice

Research Implications

Collectively, the papers in this article argue for a new vision of research on youth civic development and education for American citizenship. They comprise a call to shape a research agenda that examines how national identity develops in a liberal democracy, in a nation that stands all at once for diversity, individuality, and unity, and what that means for how young people develop civic identity and citizenship practices. This includes a need for research that looks anew at civic education, at all that is taking place in civics classrooms and how it is impacting how young people come to identify with their country. Beyond the classroom, this is also a call for research on the interaction between national identity development and the ways that communities and American society at large initiate young people into civic activity. America came about as a nation because the people held a commitment to the common good, and that is the cornerstone of a functioning democracy. What roles are young people expected to take in a society that depends on such a commitment, and what opportunities are made available for them to

take those roles? How do those expectations and opportunities impact their national identity formation? And conversely, how does national identity formation impact the ways that young people make use of opportunities and take on civic roles?

Educational Implications

The articles in this issue also converge on a call for renewing how young people are prepared for American citizenship. Three aspects of civic education emerged as potential areas of renewal, which will be discussed here as the American narrative, the public square, and authentic participation through structured opportunities. The first of these, the American narrative, relates to the curriculum of civics classes and what that curriculum conveys about the important and formative ideas of American history. What is the story of America and how is it being taught to young people? This is an important question to address in rethinking how civic education can better support young people in forming positive and constructive American identity. The story of America is framed by compelling ideas and, in theory, the narratives that give shape to American history should inspire young people believe in the importance of sustaining those ideas. However, as has been argued in this issue, the story that is presented to young people is typically selective in ways that provide an inaccurate and incomplete portrayal of American history, and rather than offering inspiration, can instead be a source of discouragement and disenfranchisement for many youth. This happens in part because there is not a singular narrative of America, but multiple, complex social histories told from diverse perspectives. These multiple and complex stories could be a source for inspired learning and critical thinking, but are instead boiled down to rote facts for classroom consumption.

An approach that aims to foster positive, constructive, and fluid American identity might see the learning of the American narrative as an ongoing venture for both students and adults. The perspectives expressed in this issue suggest that the narratives of America that young people learn should be authentic and inspirational with regards to the important ideas that America is founded on, and approached as cases for critical discussion, with both adults and students reflecting on the stories in relation to the experiences that they are having in American society. As such, the evolving and plural nature of the American narrative and American identity is addressed in the classroom while providing a curriculum that addresses the stories of important people and events that have shaped the country. Identity takes shape through the narratives that young people internalize (Somers, 1994), so it is critical that more attention is paid to the national narratives that we share and discuss with young people. The current overarching narrative of America is conflicted (Malin, this issue), distorted (Spencer, this issue), and contrary to positive civic identity (Sullivan, this issue). Revising the narratives that are shared with young people in the civics curriculum, and how they are shared, would be an important step toward a renewed American identity.

The second implication for education suggested here has to do with the notion of a public square as a space for civil discourse, and the potential for incorporating such a space into civic education. Though a somewhat abstract concept in contemporary America, realizing a public square is paramount to a functioning democracy, especially in a diverse society, because it is in this space where people air different perspectives on community issues and forge compromise so that action can be taken. The articles in this issue argue for reinvigorating the idea of a civil public square in America, and suggest

approaches for incorporating young people into such forums, implying that the public square concept may have a role in civic education. Ideally, such a forum is a place to hear and accept other's differences, understand how those different perspectives shape society, and learn to compromise with those who have different perspectives for the good of the community. Introducing the public square through the education system or in other youth development spaces builds on the success of discussion and debate methods already used in civics classrooms. It expands on that success by allowing for more focus on the listening aspect of discourse and the ultimate need for seeking compromise among different perspectives. Furthermore, by introducing the practice of a public square in the spaces where young people learn and develop as citizens, we can address the concerns that Spencer raised about the need to know ourselves before engaging with others who are different. In an educational setting, adults can structure safe environments for students to have candid and reflective discussions about shared experiences prior to entering into debate about disagreements and different perspectives.

The third educational implication that emerges from this issue is that service learning programs and community involvements are important, and there are ways that they might be re-imagined to be of more benefit to young people's developing civic and national identity. Despite low civic and political participation among youth, they do have political and civic interests, and nascent desire to contribute in positive ways to society. At a recent conference, Andrew Delbanco (2010) argued that "youth have a tremendous appetite for defending human rights and environmental rights, and we have an obligation to encourage them to act on their drives to defend and protect the rights of others," and Bill Sullivan (2010) concurred that among contemporary youth there is a "huge

spontaneous engagement with questions of environmentalism and sustainability.” Both suggest that the issues that motivate and inspire youth to action are important avenues for them to express their desire to commit to social justice and the common good, and shape a constructive American identity. As such, service learning opportunities should be structured to build from the existing civic drives that young people exhibit and encourage them to engage meaningfully and authentically in activities that defend their strongly held beliefs.

A second consideration about structuring civic opportunities for youth is the importance of inspiring them to *any* community-oriented commitment as a way to foster American identity. As Deaux (this issue) argued in her discussion of immigrants and American identity formation, participation in community organizations through ethnic, religious, or other group affiliation is an important way to become civically active in ways that are meaningful to the individual and also contribute to the community. For young people, such affiliations can provide authentic service opportunities and guidance for structuring a meaningful civic life. In other contexts, advocating for strong ethnic, religious, or other social group commitments might appear counter to the call to foster American identity, but as has been well evidenced in the articles above, the community-building and social commitments that are encouraged through such organizations are an important counterweight to the prevalence of individualism and incivility in contemporary American society, and a way for young people to develop a foundation of civic unity and responsibility that can be adapted beyond the limited context of a local affiliation.

The suggestions put forth here are seeds for future work that integrates questions of youth identity formation with those of how to sustain the deeply valued aspects of American society. Specifically, the call in this issue is for a renewal of the dialogue about American identity that puts youth development front and center, such that the focus is on how to educate and develop citizens that have the will and capacity to uphold a free and democratic American society. As the *American Identity Renewed* conference and this volume demonstrate, the ideas about fostering American Identity among young people are far from settled, and opinions on these matters diverge widely among eminent scholars in both American philosophy and adolescent development. While some educational implications are hinted at, there is first need for a strong research base that addresses the questions about American identity formation that were surfaced in this volume. In this case, the call for further research is meaningful and vital, as there is a pressing need for empirical evidence to guide educators and practitioners in helping adolescents to foster American identity.

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