

**ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY:
WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY SHOULD THEY BE AT THE
CORE OF THE CURRICULUM IN SCHOOLS?**

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October 16, 2003 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina**

In 1848, Karl Marx wrote, “A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism.” Well, Marx’s specter has faded, and in today’s world, democracy and liberty have superceded it. During the last quarter of the 20th century, there has been a global surge of democracy that has transformed international relations and inspired peoples in places throughout the world. The current and continuing advance of democracy in the governments of nation-states has brought about a correspondingly strong surge of education for democracy. In particular, I know leaders of post-communist countries in Southeastern Europe who recognize that the development of an authentic democracy depends, in large part, upon the education of competent citizens. They want to teach students what democracy is and what it is not, how to practice democracy, and why it is good—or at least better than the alternatives to it.

The rising tide of international interest in education for democracy has stimulated fresh thinking about education for democracy in my country, the United States of America. As educators from around the world have turned to us for advice about how to teach democracy, we Americans have been challenged to think more carefully about what it is, how to do it, and how to justify it. My ongoing discussions with colleagues in various parts of the world, for example, have led to renewal and refinement of my thinking about education for democracy. During the past 14 years, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, I have thought and talked again and again with colleagues in America and several other countries about two related questions. What are the essential elements of a good education for democracy? And why should these elements be at the core of the curriculum in schools?

During the remainder of my lecture, I will present to you **ten** essential elements of education for democracy in schools. My experience and research have taught me that these elements are necessary qualities of a good education for democracy. I recognize that the **ten** elements I will present to you are **not** sufficient to a good education for democracy. However, if any

one of these elements is omitted or neglected, then the student's education for democracy will be flawed. So, what are these ten essential elements? And why should they be at the core of the curriculum, so that all students will be exposed to them again and again throughout their years in school?

The first essential element of a good education for democracy is a systematic and continual emphasis on teaching and learning knowledge of democracy, democratic government, and democratic society. If students would be prepared for effective and responsible participation in a democracy, then they must know what it is and what is it **not**. They must know the standards or criteria by which we distinguish democratic governments and societies from those that are **not** democratic. Most scholars agree about the minimal standard by which to judge whether or not a government is a democracy: it is minimally a democracy if the people's representatives in government are elected in free, fair, open, and competitive elections; and the electorate is inclusive so that a large majority of the people who live under the government's authority have the right to vote. Thus, there is government by consent of the governed in which the people's representatives are accountable to the people.

If our students are to be well educated about the concept of democracy, however, they need to know more than the minimal definition that pertains only to standards for conducting elections of the people's representatives in government. They must learn that a more fully developed democracy exceeds the minimal electoral standard by providing constitutional guarantees for civil liberties and human rights of all the people living in the society under the government's authority. In a fully developed democracy, there is a people's government, which is limited by the supreme law of the people's Constitution, for the purpose of protecting equally, through the rule of law, the rights of everyone in the society. In particular, there is constitutional protection for the individual's rights to think, speak, decide, and act freely to influence the policies and actions of the government. Thus, there is majority rule with protection of the human rights of everyone, including individuals in the minority.

The most rigorous test of whether or not a society is fully democratic and free, with human rights and justice for all, is in two questions: Are the society's most unpopular individuals and groups secure in their enjoyment

of human rights? And do they enjoy justice under the law on equal terms with others in the society? If the answer is yes, then the government and society are perfectly democratic and free. However, not even one government and society in the world perfectly meets this test. There is no such thing as a perfect democracy, and there never will be. Rather, the best democratic governments and societies are the least imperfect ones—the ones that come closest to the standards by which we distinguish democracies from non-democracies and compare and evaluate various democratic governments.

At present, according to the annual global surveys of Freedom House, an American nongovernmental organization, less than half of the world's democracies sufficiently satisfy the most stringent criteria by which they may achieve the highest rating for democracy and freedom, because they really attempt to protect the human rights of all citizens. If students would have a good education for democracy, they should learn how to use the criteria by which we minimally distinguish a democracy from a non-democracy and a more fully developed and free democracy from one that is less developed and less free.

The second essential element of a good education for democracy is teaching and learning knowledge of the Constitution and institutions of the democratic government and civil society in which the students live. A good education for democracy in any country necessarily includes systematic instruction about the principles of the Constitution, the institutions of government under this Constitution, and the nongovernmental institutions that constitute the civil society. As they learn about the constitutional government and civil society of their country, students should be challenged continuously to use the criteria by which we recognize a democracy to assess or critically appraise the extent to which their own governmental institutions and civil society organizations are or are not in conformity with worldwide standards for democracy and human rights. And students should be asked to compare their government and civil society with the governments and civil societies of other nations in terms of the generally accepted criteria for democracy. They should be challenged to make judgments about whether or not their government and civil society are more or less democratic and free than those of other countries.

The third essential element in a good education for democracy is development of the student’s propensity and capacity to apply or use knowledge to think and participate competently in a democracy. Basic knowledge of democracy—its principles, practices, and history—ought to be applied by individuals to the civic and political events of the past and present; if so, this knowledge can be learned thoroughly and used constructively in their lives. So, students need to learn skills of cognition and skills of participation in concert with their acquisition of knowledge.

Cognitive skills enable individuals to identify, describe, organize, interpret, explain, and evaluate information and ideas in order to make sense of their experiences and to make decisions about them. If students develop cognitive skills, they can respond to their experiences reasonably and effectively, and when confronted by a public issue, for example, they can make and defend decisions about the matter, as a good citizen should do.

Participation skills, used in concert with cognitive skills, enable individuals to cooperate with others to monitor and influence the actions and decisions of their government and to make their representatives in government accountable to them. Participation skills, when conjoined with cognitive skills, also enable individuals to cooperate with others as leaders and followers in the nongovernmental organizations that constitute their civil society and thereby to act for the common good. So, education for democracy in schools must include lessons and projects that involve students cooperatively in active learning of skills that enable them to participate constructively in their government and civil society.

The fourth essential element of a good education for democracy involves the development of civic virtue and the behavioral dispositions of the good citizen in a democracy. Civic virtue entails the subordination of personal interests to the common good of the community to which one belongs. If students would develop civic virtue, they must practice the behavioral dispositions or habits of the good citizen in a democracy. Examples of these democratic dispositions are temperance or self-control, fortitude or courage, commitment to justice or fairness, prudence, charity or compassion for others, hope or optimism about the future, honesty or fidelity to the truth, civility in dealings with others, tolerance, and respect for the equal worth and dignity of each person in recognition of the equal humanity

of each one. These traits of good character constitute the morality of democratic citizenship.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who went to the United States in the 1830s and wrote *Democracy in America*, was impressed by the democratic dispositions of Americans, who readily gave their time, money, and other resources to the nongovernmental associations of their civil society, which contributed extensively to the common good. He called these behavioral dispositions “the habits of the heart” and claimed that democracy could not work without them. According to Tocqueville, a country with the very best constitution, institutions, and laws will **not** have a sustainable democracy unless “the habits of the heart” are firmly implanted in the character of the citizens. So, students in schools must be involved in activities that require them to demonstrate civic virtue through persistent practice of the dispositions or traits of morality that sustain a healthy and vibrant democracy.

The fifth essential element of a good education for democracy is the systematic connection and integration of basic knowledge, skills, and dispositions in the curriculum and instruction presented to students. Effective teaching of knowledge about democracy requires that it be integrated with skills of cognition, skills of participation, and moral dispositions of the good citizen. All the necessary components of a good education for democracy—knowledge, skills, and dispositions—must be continually connected through activities that involve application of knowledge through the persistent practice of skills and dispositions. Elevation of one component of education for democracy over the other components—for example, knowledge over skills and dispositions or vice-versa—is a flaw that impedes teaching and learning about the theory and practice of democracy. So, basic knowledge, skills, and dispositions must be combined and connected continually, systematically, and dynamically to bring about an effective education for democracy.

Core content, however, is the indispensable foundation of an effective education for democracy. Individuals who have a deep and abiding comprehension of the prevailing principles of democracy—the big ideas that define democratic government and citizenship—are more likely than others to exhibit several desirable virtues or dispositions of democratic citizenship,

such as a propensity to vote and otherwise participate in political and civic life, a sense of political tolerance, a sense of political efficacy, political interest, and concern for the common good of the community. Furthermore, students who comprehend key concepts in the theory and practice of democracy tend to be adept in their use of such cognitive skills as organization and interpretation of information; and they are more likely than others to know and retain information about political institutions and events. Examples of the concepts that should be at the core of a good education for democracy are representative government, popular sovereignty, constitutionalism or the rule of law, human rights, responsible citizenship, civil society, and market economy.

The sixth essential element of a good education for democracy is to teach knowledge, skills, and dispositions of democracy throughout the curriculum of the school. Teaching and learning the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of democracy should begin in the primary school and continue at every grade or level to the completion of secondary school or high school. And there should be lessons about democracy in various school subjects, such as history, literature, economics, and geography in addition to separate courses in the subjects of civics and government. In particular, I urge the inclusion of lessons about the history of democracy in courses on world history, European history, and the history of particular countries, especially the student's own country. As students move from lower to higher grades in schools, they should study more complexly and deeply the same ideas, skills, and dispositions that constitute the core of a good education for democracy. Thus, they might master these ideas, skills, and dispositions by the time they complete their last required year of school.

The seventh essential element of a good education for democracy is involvement of students in extracurricular activities that can be connected to the formal teaching and learning experiences required by the curriculum and conducted by teachers in the classrooms of schools. There is a strong relationship between participation in student organizations and team sports and achievement of democratic skills and dispositions. In particular, participation in student government activities can provide opportunities for learning democracy by doing it. Desirable outcomes are maximized, however, when there are strong connections between learning experiences within the curriculum and those in extracurricular activities.

Development of students' democratic skills and dispositions through extracurricular activities is enhanced when an ethos or spirit of democracy pervades the meetings of student organizations as a consequence of the school's administrative policies.

The eighth essential element of a good education for democracy is the teacher-led discussion of current events and issues in an open classroom in which the environment is conducive to and supportive of a free exchange of information and ideas, and where there is mutual tolerance for diverse opinions. Students' achievement of democratic skills and dispositions is increased greatly when the teacher establishes and maintains a democratic ethos in the classroom, which encourages free and open expression of ideas, security for freedom of inquiry, and respect for the dignity and worth of each person in the group. However, when leading class discussions of current events or public issues, the teacher should remember the primary importance of content or subject matter anchored in core concepts, because this is the foundation of a sound education for democracy. Superficial discussions of trendy topics or current events, which are separated from basic knowledge of the subject, are not likely to yield significant and enduring gains in the student's competence for citizenship in a democracy.

The ninth essential element of a good education for democracy is to teach about democracy and democratic citizenship comparatively and internationally. The worldwide spread of democracy suggests the need for globalizing and internationalizing the curriculum in schools. We cannot justify in the United States of America, in the countries of Southeastern Europe, or in any other country an education for democracy that is restricted in scope to a particular sovereign state. If we would teach democracy in schools realistically and responsibly, then we must teach it globally and internationally. And the main method of teaching and learning is the comparative method of analysis and appraisal.

By teaching democracy comparatively, we broaden and deepen what students learn. Breadth of knowledge comes from studying comparatively the wide range of institutional and constitutional designs and political practices across many different democracies of our world. Depth of knowledge about particular principles and institutions of democracy is

conveyed by examination of various examples from different countries, which represent variations on the common themes or principles by which we distinguish democratic and undemocratic governments.

By teaching democracy comparatively, we direct the attention of students to alternatives and the consequences of making particular decisions. And we enable students to understand the common or generic political and civic choices confronted by people across the cultures and civilizations of our world.

By teaching democracy comparatively, we develop among students a useful method of inquiry that helps them to more readily and accurately understand ideas and information about government, politics, and other aspects of human societies and cultures. By using the comparative method students, can develop high-level intellectual skills. They learn, for example, how to organize and interpret information in terms of categories or concepts, to compare and contrast information according to certain categories or standards, and to make appraisals or evaluations of objects according to particular criteria. Thus, to teach democracy comparatively is to prompt students to think analytically and critically about the constitutions, governments, and political activities of people around the world.

There are three main types of comparisons that teachers and students should make in their global and international studies of democracy. **First**, they should use warranted categories as criteria by which to distinguish a democracy from a nondemocracy. **Second**, they should use justifiable categories (concepts) to compare and contrast various democratic countries and thereby to appraise the extent to which particular countries are more or less democratic. **Third**, they should compare and contrast the constitutions, institutions, and participation of citizens in various democratic countries to understand the different ways that democracy is practiced throughout the world.

The tenth essential element of a good education for democracy is the effective preparation of teachers in terms of the knowledge, skills, and virtues of democratic citizenship. Education for democracy should be brought substantially into university-based programs of teacher education. It is reasonable to presume that if desirable civic education reforms in primary and secondary schools would succeed, then teachers must be well-prepared

to teach democracy and democratic citizenship. The IEA Civic Education Study revealed that most teachers involved in this international inquiry believed that one very important way to improve education for democracy in schools would be to provide more teacher preparation in the core ideas of democracy and democratic citizenship. And the acclaimed report issued recently, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, recommended strongly that departments of education in colleges and universities should strengthen the civics components of the pre-service preparation of teachers and the in-service or professional development of teachers in elementary and secondary schools. Important higher-education reforms in civic education for prospective teachers are being carried out now in several post-communist countries in the Civitas International Exchange Program conducted by the Center for Civic Education. For example, there are very important programs on civic learning in teacher preparation in Samara, Russia, in Szeged, Hungary, and in Vilnius, Lithuania. If the preceding elements of a good education for democracy would be carried out successfully in schools, then prospective teachers must be educated in terms of these essential elements; because no one can teach certain knowledge, skills, and virtues to students if she or he has not learned them.

In conclusion, the ten essential elements of a good education for democracy are necessary, if not sufficient, to the preparation of students for civic and political life in any country undergoing transition to democracy. And these ten essential elements are necessary to the maintenance of democracy in any country that has it and wants to keep it. These ten elements certainly are not all there is to a good education for democracy; as you know, there is more to it. But, without these ten elements, education for democracy is not complete, and it is not likely to achieve its goals. The maintenance and improvement of democracy in the United State of America or anywhere else will not happen unless there is good education for democracy in schools, which transmits to each new generation of children the basic knowledge, skills, and dispositions by which citizens make their democracy work. So, if we would maintain and improve democracy by teaching it effectively, then we must emphasize the ten essential elements of education for democracy in the curriculum of schools, in the teaching and learning of students, and in the university-based preparation of teachers.

The task of making a transition to democracy and then sustaining it can be difficult, as the recent history of post-communist countries has shown us. While the demise of Soviet-style communism has been complete, the development of new democracies has been partial and sometimes painful. As you know very well, there were 28 states that abandoned communism during and after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, less than half of them have met the generally accepted standards by which we distinguish a democracy from a non-democracy. Some of these countries are outright dictatorships with few if any democratic tendencies, and several of them seem to vacillate unpredictably, back and forth, between manifestations of democracy and dictatorship.

The long and difficult journey from totalitarian dictatorship to democracy and liberty reminds us that the transition from one political system to another, and the subsequent consolidation of it, is never easy and quick. It is the long-term work of generations, not the quick-fix of a moment in time. And a fundamental part of this long-term project is education for democracy in schools.

Through a good education for democracy in schools, our students will learn that the future success of their government and civil society depends ultimately on citizens, persons who are just like them. However, without basic knowledge of democracy, skills of cognition and participation in democracy, and civic virtues and dispositions that buttress democracy, citizens cannot sustain and improve their democracy. Indeed, without essential knowledge, skills and virtues, individuals are citizens in name only, because they lack the capacity and power to make good decisions, to carry out their decisions, and to influence their government, as citizens in a democracy are expected to do. Let us, then, resolve to do what it takes to provide our students with a good education for democracy, which is based on the ten essential elements.

Thank you for your kind attention to my remarks. I look forward to my participation in the remainder of your conference and to my continued interaction with many of you about the challenges and possibilities of preparing our students to be competent citizens of a democracy; which, despite its imperfections, is the best type of government our world has known.

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