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**“Strengthening the Ideals of Democracy
and Citizenship in Turbulent Times:
A Muslim Educator’s Perspective”**

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Introduction

The 21st century is a turning point in the history of American democracy, and in fact in the world. As America takes a leading role in promoting the principles of democracy to the many parts of the world, the crucial question is how many Americans understand the concept of democracy and civic education. As a naturalized citizen, I felt I had limited information about the kind of government or public policy here, but I was struck with awe to find out that my American born students were no better than me.

Research

The National Curriculum for England: Citizenship emphasizes the vital role citizenship plays in the life of students. “Citizenship gives pupils the knowledge, skills, and understanding to play an effective role in society at local, national, and international levels. It helps them to become informed, thoughtful, and responsible citizens who are aware of their duties and rights. It promotes their spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development, making them more self-confident and responsible both in and beyond the classroom. It encourages pupils to play a helpful part in the life of their schools, neighborhoods, communities, and the wider world. It also teaches them about our economy and democratic institutions and values, encourages respect for different national, religious and ethnic identities; and develops pupils’ ability to reflect on issues and take part in discussion.”

According to the National Curriculum for England: Citizenship (1999) there are four components for the citizenship education, which are:

(1) Civic knowledge (2) Cognitive civic skills, (3) Participatory civic skills, and (4) Civic dispositions.

Civic knowledge is the knowledge of citizenship and government in a democracy. The component of Civic knowledge may consist of, for example, principles of democracy, constitution and practices of democratic citizenship and history of democracy. It is based on an important assumption that not all knowledge is of equal worth, and not all knowledge is hundred percent accurate a key principle that guides education.

Cognitive civic skills are the intellectual skills of citizenship in a democracy, such as identifying and describing phenomena of political and civic life, or evaluating and defending positions on public events and issues. It may also include but not limited to thinking critically about conditions of political and civic life and how to improve it.

Participatory civic skills help citizens to interact with other citizens to promote personal and common interests. It also consists of implementing policy decision on public issues and taking action to improve the political and civic life of individuals.

Dispositions of citizenship in a democracy helps in promoting the common good by encouraging citizens to show respect, protections of rights and supporting and practicing civic virtues. Most important of all it affirms the common and equal humanity and dignity of each person regardless of their ethnicity, culture, religion, or gender. "Virtues are good for the individual as well as the community--enabling people to live harmoniously within themselves and with others. Although thinking about and discussing virtues are important components of character education, virtues are not merely thoughts, but habits of behavior." (p.55) Civic virtues such as self-discipline, civility, honesty, trust, courage, compassion, tolerance, temperance, and respect of all individuals are the underlying key principles of a healthy constitutional representative democracy.

This “kind of civic education represented by our four-component model can yield citizens with deep understanding of the essential concepts and principles of democracy, strong commitment to them based on reason, high capacity for using them to analyze, appraise, and decide about the issues and problems of the political world, and the competence to act responsibly and effectively as engaged citizens to influence their civil society and government.” Patrick & Vontz, 2001. p.43

Teaching Diverse Populations, EDG 2701 is a foundation course in the Education program which helps the student teachers become prepared to teach to a diverse student body of the large majority of immigrant population filling our public schools. Diversity, according to James Banks, presents both opportunities and challenges to American society and to teachers. Diversity enriches our nation, communities, schools, and classrooms. Individuals from many different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups have made and continue to make significant contributions to American society. Diversity also provides our society with myriad and enriched ways to identify, describe, and solve, social, economic, and political problems. (Banks, p.137)

(Teaching for Diversity and Unity, from the book Education for Democracy)

The aim of Teaching Diverse Populations is to develop reflective national and global identifications, through the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function within and across diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, language and religious groups. Without a foundation in civic education student teachers miss the whole idea of the importance of diversity in their education classes.

Diversity is best understood when it is not abstract but is more of a concrete. James Banks in an article, Citizenship Education and Teacher Knowledge argues that “citizenship education, called multicultural citizenship, will enable students to acquire a delicate balance of cultural, national, and global identifications and to understand the ways in which knowledge is constructed to become knowledge producers and to participate in civic action to create a more humane nation and world.” Banks, 1997 p. 81

“In a democracy, the need for a body of informed and responsible citizens capable of confronting, debating, and ultimately deciding current issues of public policy cannot be

overstated. Civic education is a vital means by which our society transmits to the next generation the core knowledge, skills, and dispositions of democratic citizenship. It is what allows democratic societies to reproduce themselves across generations.” (Patrick, Vontz, & Nixon, 2001, p. 93) (Issue-Centered Education for Democracy through Project Citizen)

Okihiro (1994) points out that people and groups in the margins have been the conscience of the United States throughout its history. “They have kept the United States committed to its democratic ideals as stated in its founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. He argues that the margins have been the main sites for keeping democracy and freedom alive in the United States. It was the groups in the margins that reminded and forced the United States to live up to its democratic ideals when they were most severely tested. Examples include: a) slavery and the middle passage, b) Indian removal in the 1830s, c) the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and d) segregation and apartheid in the South that crumbled during the 1960s and 1970s in response to the African American-led civil rights movement. (Banks, p.134)

(Teaching for Diversity and Unity in a Democratic Multicultural Society)

Today, it is no different, and sadly speaking we have not learned lessons from our history. Racial profiling, discrimination, and prejudice continues and the only difference is that it may not be the Native Americans, or the Hispanics but it is a new group, and this time it happens to be the Arabs of Middle Eastern origin and mostly Muslims

Process

This research paper focuses on the strategies used at a community college to teach about civic education and multicultural education. I used three approaches to do so,

1. Teaching the curriculum of Teaching Diverse Populations as a Muslim professor
2. Teaching civic education and service learning using a collaborative model of Muslim Students Association and Future Teachers of America
3. Incorporating We the People....Project Citizen program implemented in the Valencia Community College, in Orlando, Florida.

1. Teaching the curriculum from a Muslim woman's perspective, I was challenged by my students in these turbulent times as I began to encourage open forums and discussions through the information brought to them through the media. Religion is a very sensitive topic and it is expected by educators to keep it outside the classroom. It was hard to deal with the negativity that most students brought into these open forums about women inequalities, the misperception of jihad, and the whole notion of religious fundamentalism.

2. Teaching Civic Education to both my American students and the Muslim Students through service learning project added another dimension to my teaching. As an advisor to the Muslim Students Association, an extra-curricular club at the college I took the responsibility of guiding Muslim students towards the goal of preserving their Islamic identity, but also teaching them, (children of immigrants) about civic education and service learning and about their loyalty to the country that they have chosen to call their home. One of my greatest challenges was to maintain a balance between the two---to present an unbiased approach to civic education in 'turbulent times' at times where the question on most of my students mind may have been "how patriotic or loyal am I to this country.

As the advisor to the Muslim Students Association (MSA) I encouraged college-wide inter-club activities and service projects that vividly demonstrated the spirit and mission of civic education on campus. Fund-raising activities to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina, feeding the homeless shelters, supporting the civil rights activities on campus, were some of the ways that helped build bridges between the isolated MSA and the larger student body. Once a semester Ethnic Specific events sponsored by MSA promoted cross-cultural and cross-religious understanding between the Muslim and non-Muslim students on campus. One of the most popular events was Muslims Around the World a showcase of diverse cultures, clothing, artifacts, and ethnic foods that attracted large crowds of students and which mainly helped students understand that Muslims are Americans too and are from around the globe, not just from the Middle East. Educational institutions can be the best of the places where students can come to see diversity and the different perspectives that it brings.

3. Finally, incorporating the civic education curriculum into the multicultural education helped in the marriage of both topics. We the People. . . Project Citizen a civic education

program designed for students in middle school to high school is used in schools throughout the United States and in 35 countries in different regions of the world. The materials have been translated from English to such languages as Albanian, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Mongolian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, and Spanish. The international distribution and use of Project Citizen has been done through Civitas: An International Civic Education Exchange Program. Project Citizen is designed to teach students the role of government in public policy; democracy education and their roles and responsibilities as citizens in the process.

The popular use of this program has inspired me to use it at the higher education level in the foundation course of Teaching Diverse Population, EDG 2701 at the Valencia Community College. This course is a required course for all education majors in order to meet one of the major goals of education, which is diversity. Project Citizen introduces students to the field of public policy and students identify the public policy issue selected through a process of consensus, and proceed with the following phases of the program:

- Identify a problem
- gather data related to the problem
- examine a solution to the public issue
- develop a public policy to address the issue
- develop an action plan that addresses the appropriate level of government
- assess the consequences of their actions, which includes recognition of limitations imposed by federal and state constitutions
- develop a portfolio
- reflect on their learning experience.

My program reinforced the idea of civic education, as Parker, Ninomiya, & Cogan in their article Educating World Citizens: Towards Multinational Curriculum Development, 2002 believe that Multicultural Education program can help students deal with serious worldwide problems as a member of a worldwide society. It teaches them the

1. Ability to look at and approach problems as a member of a global society.

2. Ability to work with others in a cooperative way and to take responsibility for one's roles/duties within society.
3. Ability to understand, accept, appreciate and tolerate cultural differences.
4. Willingness to resolve conflict in a nonviolent manner.
5. Willingness and ability to participate in politics at local, national, and international levels.

Conclusion

In no other times in the history of higher education was there a greater need to educate the future teachers in civic education and democracy than it is today. If we do nothing to improve how student teachers are educated for citizenship, we give up the ability to set the terms for the future of our schools, and in the end, the nation. Despite the scientific and technological advancements that higher education offers to its students “a sense of ‘dis-ease’ gnaws at the collective American soul. Something feels wrong. A big part of that ‘something’ is a deepening sense of civic disconnection.. . . Many feel overlooked and betrayed by governments that seem beyond the reach of ordinary citizens or captive to special interests. At the same time, more and more Americans seem to be disengaging from even the most fundamental acts of a citizenship, such as voting and keeping informed about public issues.”

(Every Student A Citizen: Executive Summary)

This indeed is dangerous for teacher preparation colleges, as schools are considered mini societies and agents of social reform.

United States of America is considered to be a leading nation in democratic ideals; a nation that takes pride in setting an example of democracy to the Middle East and other countries of the world. Our country's first and primary responsibility should be to rekindle the fire of democracy in our homeland before exporting it to the other parts of the world. Thus, “this country cannot afford to educate a generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit society or how to influence democratic decision making.” Teacher Education “is uniquely positioned to help both students and our communities to explore new ways of fulfilling the promise of justice and dignity for all, both in our own democracy and as part of the global community. We know that pluralism is a source of strength and vitality that will enrich our students' education and help them learn

both to respect difference and to work together for the common good.” (Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education)

As a professor in Education I “believe that the challenge of the next millennium is the renewal of our own democratic life and reassertion of social stewardship. In celebrating the birth of our democracy, we can think of no nobler task than committing ourselves to helping catalyze and lead a national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education. We believe that now and through the next century,” our programs of education “must be vital agents and architects of a flourishing democracy”, a democracy that can present a model by action not just by words. “By reflecting its conscience and reasserting its values and beliefs---community responsiveness and civic participation, extending educational opportunity and valuing diversity”---Valencia Community College can play a significant role in training tomorrow’s teachers and transforming students into citizens of a global world. (Franco, 2004). (The Community College Conscience: Service-Learning and Training Tomorrow’s Teachers)

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