

# **Comparisons on Civic Education**

**By Mary Anne Raywid**

I find this an interesting pair of approaches. Considering them side by side brings added appropriateness to James M. Banner, Jr.'s opening quotation: "Before I give you the benefit of my remarks, I'd like to know what we're talking about." It seems clear to me that in large measure these two statements speak to different topics. Interestingly, much that Banner apparently takes as the givens in the situation is precisely what Barbara Finkelstein sees at issue. They are agreed, it seems, that teachers must be professionals and that their preparation must accord with such a purpose. Beyond that, we have surely been spared much hint of redundancy.

For Banner, the launching pad for improving civic education seems to be built of the following assumptions: First, there is a danger that civic education—whatever it may be—threatens to become all-embracing in intent, and pretentious in its expectations. Second, needed empirical research into the civic values of Americans should yield the civic values to be taught the young. Third, questions about civic learning reduce to curricular questions. Fourth, the necessary civic learning should be inserted into all the courses where it has relevance; it does not

demand separate courses. Fifth, "the fundamental conundrum of civic education ... [is] ... how to reconcile the values of individual integrity and of mutual purpose." And sixth, there is a permanent irreconcilability between the school's roles as "the arm of public authority" on the one hand and as "the catalyst and liberation of human potential" on the other—and this conflict is best met with "forthright acceptance" and the search for equilibrium.

Finkelstein, on the other hand, is perhaps less worried that our efforts will be overblown than that they will prove insufficient to the task. She suggests that she would find a sampling of Americans' civic values—even a very valid and reliable sample—inadequate to content determination for civic education. The literature she cites makes a convincing case that civic education is much more than curriculum-determined instruction. Moreover, she urges an approach that will require direct and sustained teaching, in supplement of treating civic values as they arise throughout the curriculum. And perhaps most fundamentally, she finds the challenge of the content of the civic learning needed for today far more problematic than Banner's "fundamental conundrum"—the tension between the individual and the group. This is not to suggest that Banner's conundrum is simple or artificial. It is, of course, the enduring tension of democratic theory. But Banner focuses on the logical paradoxes that have always been with us. Finkelstein is preoccupied with the context-specific demands of our time. The reason for this difference is, I suspect, that Banner's is primarily a transmission conception of education; Finkelstein's is more explicitly oriented toward the present and future.

These, then, appear to me to be the major contrasts in orientation which yielded two such very different approaches with which to begin our thinking. There is one further contrast that may also lie close to the center of these differences, although it nowhere quite surfaces: I suspect Finkelstein is part of, and would willingly associate herself with, the social studies tradition, and with social studies classes as the instructional center of civic education. Banner gives no sign of acceptance of that tradition—and indeed, one even finds a contra-indication or two in his fundamental commandments retaining the arts and sciences in the curriculum and his rejection of separate civic education courses.

I find Finkelstein's orientation much closer to my own. I think our readings of the sorest challenges of our times are more similar. I share her emphasis on the impossibility of identifying a public. The single-interest groups into which we have fragmented are but the most extreme and visible evidence of the absence of an acknowledged public philosophy. And the preoccupation with engineering concerns—to the exclusion or subordination of those which are not—suggests that the

orientation now serving many as a world view can hardly stand as a viable public philosophy.

I agree with Finkelstein, too, that the school's purpose must simultaneously be to cultivate individual liberty and authority, as well as a shared public philosophy. Surely in this she aligns herself with the traditional view of what a liberal education is about, and accepts its central liberating mission. She incorporates what has been perhaps the major contribution of the twentieth century to illuminating that mission—namely, the idea that education must focus explicitly on helping the young to learn how to think and to critically examine the world and its possibilities. I believe she is correct in identifying an expanding consensus on updating that mission for our time.

As originally formulated by John Dewey and elaborated by others, children must be taught to think carefully or critically if they would be free and in a position to direct their own lives intelligently. Today's preoccupation with that challenge, and the most persuasive response to it, comes from sociology of knowledge. It is concepts drawn from that field which with greatest clarity and insight delineate the present challenge of achieving genuine autonomy and freedom of thought; and it is strategies recommended by sociologists of knowledge that appear our most advanced evolution in meeting that challenge. What we must try to develop is what C. A. Bowers has called "cultural literacy": "the ability to read or decode the taken-for-granted assumptions and conceptual categories that underlie the individual's world of experience." Or, as formulated by Jürgen Habermas, what is needed is "communicative competence"—i.e., the ability "to negotiate meanings and purposes instead of passively accepting the social realities defined by others."

Perhaps my main quarrel with Finkelstein lies in what I find insufficient attention to the non-cognitive and non-instructed dimensions of today's civic education. She acknowledges that "to be literate as a citizen requires more than knowledge ... [it involves] ... the exercise of personal responsibility, active participation, and personal commitment to a set of values." But she fails to address how these aspects of literacy are cultivated. I am convinced that in considerable measure it has to do with a set of envioning conditions—with the kind of norms which organizations and institutions reflect, the sort of behavior modelled within them, the roles actors are invited to assume, and the nature, extent, and direction of the bonding thus generated.

I think Banner is correct in reminding us that we must "disenthrall ourselves of much of the past" since "its circumstances differed so radically from our own as to make its prescriptions generally inapplicable now." The difference of greatest significance is not, in my judgment, that schools are teaching less. In fact, I can remember how appalled I



was at youthful distortions of the Constitution reported by the Purdue Opinion Polls in the 1950s, when I began teaching—and those are what are now referred to as “the good old days.”

What has changed enormously, though, is the life worlds of those we are trying to educate. Claude Brown pinpointed the upshot of such changes when he recently returned to the Harlem ghetto in which he struggled to grow up, and which he portrayed in his memorable *Manchild in the Promised Land*. In contrast to his own boyhood friends of 20 years ago, Brown finds today's manchild “more knowledgeable, more amicable—and more likely to commit murder.” Indeed, he discovered that “murder is in style now.” It is done quite casually and gratuitously. Such total indifference to other human beings has to be predicated on a total lack of identity with them, the absence of any sense of relatedness or connection or fellow-feeling. It is quite different sentiments—and the enviroing conditions which generate and sustain them—which are necessary ingredients in the only kind of civic education which makes sense to me. I find it hard to celebrate as civic education even impressive displays of relevant propositional knowledge in the absence of a sense of social responsibility and a lived commitment to moral values. But if the necessary enviroing conditions no longer obtain, that means we must either lower our sights or try to provide those conditions within schools. In my judgment there is no choice but to attempt the latter. That is why I am more afraid our aims will be too modest than that they will be too grand. Grand they may be, if that is what it takes. It would strike me as odd to celebrate even a perfect score on the Bill of Rights exam for Harlem's manchild, if he remains prone to obliterating those rights for others at gunpoint.

Quite a lot has been learned about how schools can supply the necessary conditions—with sufficient success even to reclaim Harlem's men- and womenchildren. Similarly, recent study of effective public alternative schools as well as of private schools has shed considerable light on the school conditions that contribute importantly to the affective and valuational dimensions of civic education that I have been emphasizing. I am hoping to see more stress on these dimensions in subsequent discussions of civic education.

Meanwhile, I must note that so far little direct heed has been paid to the preparation of teachers for the civic education task. Banner and Finkelstein, as well as myself, have focused more on identifying civic education than on preparing teachers to undertake it. It is our good fortune to be able to afford the luxury of proleptic. The remainder of the task belongs to subsequent discussions.

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