

Citizenship Education in Diverse Democracies

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How Maximal or Minimal? How Thick or Thin? Citizenship Education in Diverse Democracies

A key problem in the education of citizens in open, pluralistic, liberal democratic societies concerns the tensions between values that all citizens need to share in order to create a common civic life together across difference, on the one hand, and the character of comprehensive visions of the good that draw upon particular religious, spiritual, moral, and political traditions, on the other. In a well known distinction, educational philosopher Terence H. McLaughlin situated the first set of values along a spectrum that includes maximal commitment to liberal values such as tolerance and mutual respect on the one hand and more minimal commitment on the other. In an equally well known distinction, political philosopher Michael Walzer situated the particular values of comprehensive visions of the good on a similar spectrum between thick commitments grounded in local histories, cultures, languages, on the one hand, and thinner commitments that are shared across the differences of particular faith, moral, and political traditions, on the other. In a sense then, McLaughlin's argument for maximal commitment to shared liberal values describes what Walzer called thin political and moral traditions.

Both reach across difference to define values citizens in a liberal democracy need to share in common. The difficult question for diverse societies, however, concerns just how extensive we should seek to make the common values that democratic citizens share across difference and concomitantly how thick we can allow comprehensive visions of the good to become before they ellipse any possibility of a shared civic life. Drawing on concrete examples from my experience as Dean of Students at the University of Haifa, Israel's most diverse research university with 25% Arab and 65% Jewish students, this paper will consider the strengths and weakness of some of the key theories in political and educational thought that address this query before offering my own original account for doing so. I call it the pedagogy of difference. On this account, citizenship education in diverse democracies should initiate youngsters into their own particular heritages while exposing them to different, even opposing, traditions as well.