Identifying Soft Democratic Education: Uncovering the Range of Civic and Cultural Choices in Instructional Materials

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ABSTRACT. Although student deliberation of public issues is recognized as a vital component of democratic education, little research focuses on the range of perspectives available to students during such deliberation. Social justice and legitimacy demand a wide range of inclusion, choices, and perspectives during student deliberation. This article contrasts soft versus deliberative democratic education, where the range of perspectives is correspondingly narrow or broad. Unfortunately, research shows that social studies textbooks promote soft democratic education by privileging dominant cultural representations, ideologies, and metanarratives of American exceptionality. This article presents content analysis as a method for identifying the range of civic and cultural perspectives in curricula. Once these perspectives are identified, social studies educators can revise curricula to increase inclusion and strengthen student deliberation. To illustrate this method, the author examines two sets of instructional materials. While on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum, the sets are similar in their narrow range of perspectives concerning controversial public issues.

Keywords: curriculum materials, democratic education, global education, multicultural education

In the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the framers demonstrated an understanding of the vital union between freedom of expression and a healthy democracy. In addition to the benefits that individuals receive, the framers understood that free speech enriches the public sphere by providing a larger variety of choices concerning public policy. The universe of possible choices increases when freedom of expression is encouraged. In contrast, when only one choice of public action is offered (e.g., one policy, political party, or candidate), the need for democracy becomes moot. Decision making and voting are reduced to a soft legitimization of public policy; on the surface it appears that “the people have spoken” when in reality the people have only spoken softly. This soft legitimization leads to soft democracy.

In this article, I ask the following question: given that students must be taught to participate in a democracy (Gutmann 1987; Parker 1996), what kind of democratic education do social studies instructional materials scaffold, soft or deliberative democracy? I answer this question by offering a method to examine instructional materials. By soft democratic education I mean an education for democracy that provides students with “choice” in name only and that teaches them how to participate in a soft democracy. In contrast, by deliberative democratic education I mean an education for democracy that provides students with a wide range of choices by giving voice to multiple perspectives and valuing inclusion.

Evidence suggests that instructional materials in U.S. schools unfortunately promote soft democratic education. Textbooks have long been recognized as fostering dominant cultural norms and promoting nation-bound metanarratives by limiting the number of perspectives in the curriculum (Anyon 1979; Camiccia 2007; Foster 2006; Loewen 1996; Zimmerman 2002). As part of a national study of civics instruction in the United States, Carole L. Hahn (2002) found that textbooks were remarkably similar and none discussed, for example, “the advantages and disadvantages of a multiparty system” (72). In addition, Hahn found that content was “presented as
uncontested” (73). Both of these findings give an image of soft democratic education. Similarly, in an examination of an array of instructional materials used to teach about the terrorist attacks of September 11, Diana Hess and Jeremy Stoddard (2007) found that the attacks were generally represented superficially and uncritically. Overall, they concluded, “none of the texts or materials we examined challenged students to critically examine the roots of the attacks or to analyze the external policies of the United States” (235).

Taken together, the findings of these studies indicate that students in the United States are receiving a soft democratic education. This article extends this line of inquiry by providing a method for identifying the range of choices in instructional materials teaching about controversial public issues. Although textbooks are widely used by social studies teachers, supplemental materials are often used when teaching about controversial public issues. These materials are attractive because, in contrast with textbooks, they can provide more current information, are created by a variety of authors, are relatively inexpensive, and provide an alternative to the relatively uncontroversial portrayals of events found in textbooks. As an illustration of the method, I examine two sets of supplemental instructional materials: one set teaching about immigration policy and the other set teaching about globalization. The purpose of the article is not so much to shed light on these sets of instructional materials as it is to provide good illustrations of a method for examining a variety of instructional materials. Once the range of perspectives is identified in the curriculum, unrepresented perspectives can be added.

In what follows, I first consider the areas of political philosophy and democratic education as a way to better define soft versus deliberative democratic education. This consideration provides a rationale for examining the range of choices provided to students when considering controversial public issues. Because a wide range of choices is vital for deliberative democracy, an education for deliberative democracy demands that teachers provide students choices in curriculum and instructional materials. In other words, choices supply the substance for deliberation, and without choices, instructional materials promote a democratic education in name only. Next, I describe a method for examining instructional materials to identify elements of soft or deliberative democracy. Finally, I illustrate this method through a brief examination of two sets of supplemental instructional materials.

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**Deliberative Democracy and Democratic Education**

It is widely held by theorists of deliberative democracy that three concepts undergird a healthy democracy: inclusion, legitimacy, and public decision making about the public interest (Benhabib 1996; Cohen 1989; Habermas 1975, 1998; Young 2000). Iris M. Young argues that “the model of deliberative democracy implies a strong meaning of inclusion and political equality which, when implemented, increases the likelihood that democratic decision-making processes will promote justice” (6). In the deliberative model, the government’s authority and power are legitimized by including the perspectives of all who are governed by public decisions. Emphasizing the importance of inclusion, Jürgen Habermas (1996, 110) writes that “the democratic principle states that only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process.” Through the discursive process, those with different perspectives struggle to define what is best for all who are governed. The public interest is decided discursively by all who are subject to the outcome of public decisions (e.g., laws or public policies).

In deliberation, those governed are presented with choices. The concept of inclusion is integrally connected with choice because each choice represents a perspective of those governed. A restriction of choice in deliberation limits the legitimacy of decisions because laws are decided without the participation of those governed. The raison d’être of democracy is diminished when there is no choice. In such situations, democracy is not deliberative but soft. It lacks the rigor that results from including all voices in the decision-making process.

When educating students to participate in deliberative democracy, four rationales guide the inclusion of choice in the curriculum. First, it is vital for students to understand the interrelationships between the concepts of inclusion, decision making, and legitimacy. The best way for this to occur is for students to deliberate about controversial public issues that have competing choices concerning what is in the public’s interest. Amy Gutmann (1987) writes, “A democratic state must aid children in developing the capacity to understand and evaluate competing conceptions of the good life and the good society” (44). The practice of deliberation increases the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for students to participate in a deliberative democracy.

Second, deliberation of public issues helps students understand the concept of the public interest and what it means to be part of a public with a shared voice. The process of deliberation develops what Habermas (1994) calls a community’s ethical-political self-understanding. In the process of student deliberation, Walter C. Parker (2003) writes, “a ‘we’ is deciding an issue, and each member will be bound by it” (86). In deliberative democratic education, students learn how to speak with a voice that is representative of a diverse array of interests. Parker points out that public schools are ideal places for students to learn to develop one voice from
many. Increased choice in deliberation provides students with the opportunity to develop an inclusive and socially just public voice.

Third, deliberation of controversial public issues involves higher-order thinking skills. The process of weighing multiple perspectives or choices requires students to evaluate facts and values and choose the best course of action (Oliver and Shaver 1968). After interviewing six leaders in educational reform, Fred M. Newmann (1992) concluded that there was a consensus about the need to develop students’ higher-order thinking skills in real-world situations, in contrast to the development of higher-order thinking skills as isolated processes.

Fourth, as stated in a consensus report from an international panel of educational researchers in areas of democracy and diversity, “students should learn about the complex relationships between unity and diversity in their local communities, the nation, and the world” (Banks et al. 2005, 5). The panel’s findings echo other theorists who emphasize the importance of expanding traditional perspectives on citizenship, culture, and problem solving to meet the demands of an increasingly interdependent world (Merryfield and Subedi 2001; Myers 2006; Parker, Ninomiya, and Cogan 2002). An identification of the inclusion or exclusion of these perspectives in instructional materials is a first step in the effort to educate students about democratic, multicultural, and global governance.

**Identifying the Range of Perspectives**

To identify the range of choices presented to students in the curriculum and in instructional materials, I developed a framework that represents civic and cultural dimensions of choice. First, the civic dimension describes the scale of allegiance to community (see figure 1, x axis). **Allegiance** means preference, devotion, loyalty, or fidelity to something. A person can give allegiance to a community as small in scale as a neighborhood or as large in scale as the global community. Because public education, and particularly social studies education, has traditionally emphasized allegiance to a national community (Loewen 1996; Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn 1997; Zimmerman 2002), I focus on national allegiance in this article. Second, the cultural dimension describes the scale of allegiance to culture (see figure 1, y axis). On one end of the cultural continuum is an allegiance to the dominant culture. On the other end is an allegiance to multiple cultures, especially those marginalized by the dominant culture.

I use these two dimensions, civic and cultural, to describe the amount of choice provided to students in social studies instructional materials. The two dimensions can be combined to form a two-dimensional plane with the following four quadrants: nation-bound/monocultural, nation-bound/multicultural, global/monocultural, and global/multicultural (see figure 1).

**Nation-Bound Choice**

Civic allegiance can be measured on a continuum ranging from a nation-bound perspective to a global perspective (see figure 1, x axis). Some view a national community as having precedence over a global (or human) community (see Cunningham 1986; Finn 2003; Ravitch 2007). In other words, on the civic dimension, the scale of their allegiance is to the nation. A nation-bound perspective is pervasive in many debates over global problems. For an issue such as immigration in the United States, a nation-bound perspective frames migration as an issue of costs versus benefits to the United States. For example, highly skilled immigrants are embraced because they benefit the United States. These workers are believed to benefit society more than they cost society. Immigrants with average skills may be considered a benefit to society as long as they do not demand government services such as education or civil rights such as due process. A nation-bound perspective frames globalization as a process whereby a nation must compete against other nations to “win” valuable resources. Some educators have described a nation-bound perspective as parochial or self-absorbed (e.g., Case 1993; Merryfield and Subedi 2001). A nation-bound perspective often fails to pay attention to global asymmetries such as trade barriers, foreign debt, historic oppression, consumption, and mass media.
Global Choice

Some see a global community as having precedence over a national community. This is categorized as a global perspective (Case 1993; Hanvey 1976/1982; Merryfield and Wilson 2005; Nussbaum 1996). A global perspective is located on the opposite side of the continuum from a nation-bound perspective (see figure 1, x axis). Global allegiance is conducive to adopting a systemic view of issues such as migration and globalization. For example, critical and postcolonial perspectives are used to examine how differences between nations are integrally connected to relations of power and domination (Bhabha 2004; Quashigah and Wilson 2001). The scale of civic allegiance is enlarged to include all of humanity, and the systemic forces that perpetuate global problems and unjust social policies are critically examined.

Monocultural Choice

Global and nation-bound distinctions are limited in their ability to describe global issues because they do not necessarily describe the range of cultural perspectives concerning controversial global issues. On one side of the range of cultural perspectives are those who give their allegiance to preserving and perpetuating the dominant culture (see figure 1, y axis). This is categorized as a monocultural perspective. A striking example of this perspective can be heard from radio personality Michael Savage, who proposes that the immigration debate has implications for the preservation or destruction of a national culture. His mantra, “Borders, language, and culture,” illustrates an emphasis on the preservation of the dominant culture. In his view, immigrants are threats to the dominant culture. The monocultural perspective is rarely critical of dominant culture, and when self-critical, the criticism does not penetrate core beliefs such as American exceptionalism. A mainstream perspective has been described as exclusionary because it values a dominant cultural perspective while devaluing or excluding nondominant perspectives (Banks 2004; King 2004).

Multicultural Choice

On the other side of the cultural perspective continuum (see figure 1, y axis) are those whose allegiance is to multiple cultural perspectives. In their view, multiple perspectives are important in the resolution of controversial global issues. For example, when examining the issue of human migration, the perspectives of undocumented immigrants are valued, in addition to the perspectives of U.S. citizens, because they are profoundly affected by immigration policy. In understanding the issue of globalization, a multicultural perspective might include narratives from those whose economies and cultures are threatened by trade imbalances and historical inequalities. A multicultural perspective can be described as that which values the expression of multiple cultural perspectives, particularly the perspectives of those marginalized by society (Gay 1997; Irvine 2003; Ladson-Billings 2004; Pang 2005).

Examination of Instructional Materials

With the preceding section’s descriptions as a guide, an examination of instructional materials illustrates the amount of choice contained in the materials by identifying where sections of text are located on the two-dimensional plane in figure 1. The headings found within instructional materials are a good place to start an examination. Good headings usually convey the theme of the body text. Once the theme of a heading is identified as belonging in one of figure 1’s quadrants, a close reading of the body text associated with the heading provides evidence that will confirm or deny the section’s initial location on the plane.

The next step uses the concept of a scatter plot to determine if sections of a text are distributed over all of the quadrants or concentrated in one quadrant (Camicia 2007; Krippendorff 2004). When sections of text are clustered in one quadrant, the text as a whole restricts choice and, as a result, leads to a soft democratic education. In contrast, if the sections of a text are distributed among multiple quadrants, the amount of student choice is increased, and, as a result, students learn how to participate in a healthy, deliberative democracy. In the following section, I examine two sets of supplemental instructional materials as an illustration of this process.

Two Examples of Content Analysis


The National Issues Forums (NIF) instructional materials describe multiple positions on immigration policy. The following positions are provided to students. Each is contained in a section of the NIF textbook. Following are section headings and corresponding descriptions:

1. “America’s Changing Face: Is There Too Much Difference?”: Allegiance to the nation-bound/monocultural quadrant is illustrated by a statement describing approach 1: “America should not emphasize diversity to the point that it breaks the bonds of unity—the common ideals of language and democracy that define our communities and political institutions” (6). Approach 1 also states, “Limit the number of newcomers. Otherwise, America risks losing its soul, its definition of itself. When people live in tight little ethnic communities, when they speak only a foreign language and call home often, they don’t assimilate” (27).

2. “A Nation of Immigrants: Remember America’s Heritage?”: Approach 2 “opposes limits to legal immigration and supports better ways to assimilate illegal immigrants” (6). Although advocating increased immigration, this position views immigrants as feeding a national identity as a “nation of immigrants” (6), and the end goal is assimilation. Consequently, approach 2 falls into the nation-bound/monocultural quadrant of allegiance.

nation would benefit by looking more closely at how [immigrants’] arrival affects the well-being of those who are already here” (6). This section argues that immigration policy should be determined by a cost-and-benefit analysis based solely on economics. Like the other two approaches, approach 3 is located in the nation-bound monocultural quadrant of allegiance.

All sections of the NIF text are located exclusively in the nation-bound monocultural quadrant of figure 1. The NIF text contains strong alliances to the nation and a dominant culture and does not offer choices that are oriented toward other perspectives on immigration. These findings indicate that, without the inclusion of other instructional materials, the NIF text promotes soft democratic education and the maintenance of the status quo.


Rethinking Globalization contains background materials and lesson plans on the topic of globalization. In the text, a collection of authors discuss a range of issues regarding globalization. Following are chapter titles and descriptions of contents within each chapter:

1. “Legacy of Inequality: Colonial Roots”: This chapter is located within the multicultural/global quadrant of figure 1 because it examines the history of global inequalities and their impacts on the people of multiple nations: “Part of rethinking globalization entails searching for continuities that connect past to present. What connections can students find, for example, between the cash crop demands of European colonists and the ‘structural adjustment’ demands of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank? Students may find that, in important respects, globalization is a new name for an old game” (33). Multiple cultural perspectives are represented in the text.

2. “Global Economy: Colonialism without Colonies”: This chapter is also positioned in the multicultural/global quadrant because the nation is decentered in favor of an examination of global systems of inequality. The perspectives of those victimized by these inequalities are represented: “We aim to help students appreciate some of the effects of these historical global relationships, and to learn more about the economic system and institutions that maintain those relationships. . . . While it is usually bankers and businessmen who manage the global economy, unequal economic relationships have been established and upheld by military force ever since the launching of colonialism” (63).

3. “Global Sweatshops”: This chapter emphasizes a global perspective that extends the ethical responsibility for inequality beyond national borders: “Every time we put on a pair of shoes, turn on the TV, ride in a car, kick a soccer ball, use a computer, or eat a piece of fruit, we enter into invisible relationships with workers and cultures around the world. And these relationships pose a choice for us and our students: We can confront the world as narrowly self-interested consumers, or we can begin to reflect on the ethical and political nature of hidden connections embedded in our daily lives” (127). Again, the chapter is positioned in the global/multicultural quadrant.

4. “Kids for Sale: Child Labor in the Global Economy”: This chapter decents national and dominant culture by examining the issue of child labor: “Even as we guard against applying Western cultural norms to the issue of ‘child labor,’ we can engage students in considering whether there are universal principles of human conduct that we can apply to this issue” (191). The inclusion of multiple cultural perspectives on a global scale locates this chapter within the global/multicultural quadrant.

5. “Just Food?”: This chapter details the undemocratic effects of globalization on local food production: “Articles, stories, poems, and activities in this chapter propose alternative perspectives on food and agriculture. . . . Food is not just a thing to be bought and sold; it is a series of relationships. . . . This chapter asks students to think about those relationships. At every meal, whose lives do we touch? And how does the globalization of food touch us?” (223). The chapter is located in the global/multicultural quadrant because the perspectives of people adversely affected by the globalization of food production are presented.

6. “Culture, Consumption, and the Environment”: The effects of globalization on the environment and culture are presented from multiple cultural perspectives. Additionally, the dominant view of inevitability is critically examined: “Globalization’s aim is to open up every nook and cranny of the earth to investment—to McDonald’s, to global media conglomerates, to golf courses, to automobile factories. Cultural diversity is the loser. . . . Ultimately, advertising is education. It teaches people to find meaning in consumption—to conclude: I am what I buy. And it discourages us from thinking critically about a system that is more and more represented as an inevitable and natural result of human development” (262). This chapter is located in the global/multicultural quadrant.

All of the Rethinking Globalization chapters are positioned within the global/multicultural quadrant of figure 1. Each chapter disrupts a nation-bound and monocultural view of globalization by focusing on global asymmetries. These asymmetries are portrayed as forces of inequity that devalue local culture. Because all of the choices are located within the same quadrant, the Rethinking Globalization instructional materials, if used by themselves, encourage a soft democratic education.

Discussion

Elliot W. Eisner (2002) argues that there is not one but three curricula that schools teach: explicit, null, and implicit curricula. The explicit curriculum is an officially sanctioned or explicitly stated series of learning activities, as well as the rationales behind them. The explicit
The legitimacy of democratic governance rests on the ability of the people to speak loudly. This is accomplished through deliberative democracy, a practice that fosters the expression of difference and the construction of common goals. When choices of public issues are limited, the people do not speak loudly in deliberation—they speak softly. I have described this as soft democracy, and I have called an education for such a system soft democratic education.

Based on these considerations, I have presented a method for identifying soft democracy by examining the amount of choice given to students when they deliberate about controversial public issues. The range was described by identifying the choices of civic and cultural allegiance presented to students in two sets of supplemental instructional materials. The sets of materials were similar in that, taken in isolation from other materials, they were both found to encourage a soft democratic education. This was attributed to presenting students with a narrow range of choices on controversial public issues. While I would not exclude the possibility that any one text could include all the perspectives on a controversial public issue, it seems unlikely that this will happen. However, all is not lost. We know that teachers and curriculum developers use multiple sources of instructional materials. The method presented in this article can help them identify the range of choices in these multiple sources. The next step could be to add underrepresented choices into a narrow curriculum.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS; 1994) states that the primary rationale of social studies education is “to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (vii). The method presented in this article takes this rationale seriously and proposes that an education for deliberative democracy is a powerful means for achieving the NCSS goal. However, as the two sets of instructional materials presented in this article indicate, vigilant is required to identify narrow choices and soft democracy in instructional materials.

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