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**Educating for Individual Freedom and Democratic  
Citizenship: In Unity and Diversity There Is Strength<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This article addresses contentious questions concerning individual freedom and democratic citizenship education in the contemporary circumstances of multiculturalism. It suggests that educating children for civic equality is an ambitious aim for any democracy and not one that can ever be realized once and for all. It provides evidence that multicultural conditions can challenge the very aim of educating children for civic equality. It explains that democracies are variously multicultural and the varieties of groups make a difference in the kind of education and the progress toward civic equality that can realistically be expected at any time.

**Keywords:** citizenship education, individual freedom, multiculturalism, civic equality, democracy.

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## I. Introduction

In the epilogue to *Democratic Education*, I outline a democratic approach to multicultural education and illustrate some of its practical implications for schooling in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The approach is broadly applicable because it is informed by a democratic ideal of civic equality: individuals should be treated and treat one another as equal citizens, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, race, or religion.

More or less civic equality distinguishes more from less democratic societies. Democratic education—publicly supported education that is defensible according to a democratic ideal—should educate children so that they are capable of assuming the rights and correlative responsibilities of equal citizenship, which include respecting other people's equal rights. In short, democratic education should both express and develop the capacity of all children to become equal citizens.

Multicultural education in democracies can help further civic equality in two importantly different ways: first, by expressing the democratic value of tolerating cultural differences that are consistent with civic equality; and second, by recognizing the role that cultural differences have played in shaping society and the world in which children live. Not all education that goes by the name “multicultural” serves the ideal of civic equality in one of these two ways, but democratic multicultural education can (and I argue should) do so. Toleration and recognition of cultural differences, I argue, are both desirable parts of multicultural education.

If toleration and recognition of cultural differences are both democratically desirable, then the stark contrast often drawn between a liberal politics of toleration and a nonliberal politics of recognition represents a false dichotomy. Liberal democracies can defend a set of multicultural educational practices that exhibit both toleration and recognition of cultural differences, depending on their content and social context.

To defend a politics of toleration and recognition, we must differentiate among cultural practices, since not all cultural practices deserve to be tolerated, let alone recognized as parts of a democratic culture. In a democracy, a defensible standard of differentiation by publicly supported schools emerges from asking whether the

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2. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

practices are consistent with educating children for equal citizenship. As a general rule, democratic education should tolerate or recognize the teaching of cultural differences that aid, or at least do not impede, the education of children as civic equals. Democratic education defends the many kinds of multicultural education that are consistent with the aim of expressing the civic equality of citizens and educating children for civic equality. In a democracy, citizens are empowered to disagree about what educational practices are defensible on democratic grounds, and consequently to deliberate over their disagreements. Deliberative disagreement among a diverse citizenry is an important part of the ongoing public education of multicultural democracies.

In this chapter, I examine how well civic equality, toleration, and recognition travel in multicultural democracies, and what their implications are for different forms of diversity. If multicultural democratic education is now a movement worldwide, and if it is defined by widely shared democratic aims, it also faces a tremendous variety of cultural, socioeconomic, and political conditions even within democracies. In many parts of the world, such as Western Europe, multicultural education programs have developed largely to accommodate relatively recent (post-World War II) immigrant populations. In countries such as Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, and South Africa, the debate over multicultural education revolves as much around the demands of more settled ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority groups, each of whom claims authority over its “own” children’s education. In the United States with regard to Native Americans, and in Canada with regard to the Inuit and other “First Peoples,” as in many other countries, multicultural education is also concerned with the needs of indigenous populations that have been oppressed and marginalized by the larger country in which they exist. In still other situations in some of the same countries—the United States is a particularly conspicuous case because of its legacy of slavery—historically oppressed, nonnative minorities make special claims in the name of multiculturalism on an educational system.

These examples and myriad others indicate that minority populations that make claims on multicultural education are enormously varied. They are varied in more complex ways than is generally recognized. Some theorists have argued that indigenous groups have claims to a politics of recognition while immigrant groups

do not. Immigrant groups, they argue, come to a country voluntarily and therefore can be expected to give up more of their native culture while indigenous groups were forced to integrate when they should have been permitted to perpetuate their culture. The problem with this argument is that it grossly simplifies, to the point of distorting, the condition of many immigrant as well as indigenous populations. Many immigrants were forced to escape their native countries and had little if any choice as to where to go. We cannot justifiably treat immigration either today or in the past as a purely voluntary phenomenon. Nor can we assume that the descendants of immigrants or indigenous populations face the same conditions as their ancestors. Some turn out to be better and others worse off than their ancestors with regard to the relevant democratic standard of civic equality.

Depending on their socioeconomic situation, members of immigrant and indigenous groups may be treated more or less as civic equals, and find themselves more or less free to remain in a country and cultivate the culture of their choice. If voluntary residence is the basis for a democracy's refusal to recognize a group's distinctive culture, then almost all groups have some legitimate claim to recognition, not only toleration. This is because citizenship is largely not a voluntary phenomenon. Voluntarism is not the primary dimension by which to judge claims of toleration and recognition. Civic equality is. If claims to toleration and recognition are assessed on grounds of civic equality, then among the most significant variations between groups will be their tolerance or intolerance of their dissenting members and other groups. A rule of thumb might be: a democracy should tolerate and recognize those cultures that are compatible with mutual toleration and respect within and across cultural groups.

Even limiting ourselves to democratic societies for the sake of focus, we notice how varied cultural groups are with regard to their willingness and ability to live together in a context of mutual toleration and respect. The principle of civic equality is general enough to be applicable as a starting point for multicultural education to all democratic societies. Yet educators, who have practical aims, also need to be able to move from the general to the specific. Just as educational policies unsupported by democratic principles remain arbitrary and unjustified to the people who are bound by them, general principles unlinked to educational policies and practices remain practically impotent and pragmatically untested. Any theory of democratic

multicultural education, therefore, should be both principled and adaptable to variations among groups and contexts. It needs to probe the implications of diverse cultures and conditions for its own commitment to educating children for civic equality and for the freedom to choose their way of life.

### **1. Aiming for Civic Equality**

The fundamental commitment of a democratic approach to publicly funded education (which I call democratic education, for short) is as follows: All children—regardless of their cultural background, ethnicity, race, gender, or religion—are entitled to an education adequate to equal citizenship. The issue that immediately arises within democratic education is that citizens often reasonably disagree about what constitutes an education adequate to equal citizenship.

Deliberative democracy can make a virtue out of the necessity of such disagreement. The virtue is that democracies that respect reasonable disagreement can creatively combine unity and diversity in democratic education. Effective education is locally delivered, although oversight mechanisms range from the local to the national and even international. Diverse communities can institute many variations on the common theme of educating children for equal citizenship. Creative tensions—multicultural variations on the theme of democratic education—all accept civic equality as an aim, but elaborate in innumerable ways not only on the means to more civic equality but also on the other valuable ends of education. Civic equality is a general aim of education that leaves room for democratic education to defend a great deal of diversity.

Not all disagreements in democratic societies, however, produce creative tensions in democratic education. Destructive tensions occur when dominant members of the government or opposition groups subordinate the very aim of educating children as civic equals to perpetuate their own power. In such instances, group power or culture is confused with the legitimate authority to educate. Children are then implicitly treated as the mere vehicles to transmit power or culture from one generation to the next. Educators then assume a position of absolute authority over the education of their “own” children. This practice impedes the civic equality of these children as well as their ability to develop the

tools to choose their life. Whereas creative tensions propel changes in how democratic multicultural education is conceived and designed out of a shared aim of better educating children for both civic equality and the ability to choose one's life, destructive tensions challenge these very aims.

Although destructive tensions threaten democratic education, toleration permits the profession of certain destructive positions. The democratic hope is for more creative and fewer destructive challenges. Civic equality calls for an education that empowers adults as equal citizens, and that empowerment entails (among other things) the freedom to disagree about the demands of democratic education. All we can say here is that it is a reasonable democratic hope that disagreement within the bounds of equal toleration and recognition will be on balance creative.

The diverse kinds of multicultural groups further highlight creative and destructive challenges to educating children for civic equality in multicultural democracies. Toleration and recognition of diversity should be structured as unifying practices when they aim at educating all children for civic equality. Not all multicultural practices, however, share this aim. How can democrats differentiate between multicultural practices that do and do not educate children for (more or less) civic equality? To answer this question, I draw primarily on the United States for examples because it has experienced large and recurrent cycles of immigration, has substantial indigenous communities, has a large linguistic minority, and also contains major groups of historically oppressed citizens. All of these features make it useful in developing a principled yet context-sensitive approach to multicultural education. That said, I also draw on other national contexts, and welcome scholars who focus on other countries to add both critically and constructively to this project.

Whatever examples we draw upon, two separate questions need to be asked:

- How can democratic education strive for civic equality under conditions of diversity?
- Do some multicultural conditions successfully challenge the democratic framework itself, and suggest the need for a guiding principle other than civic equality in some contexts?

Before considering these questions, I should clarify the terms *multicultural education*, *toleration*, and *recognition*.

## 2. Multicultural Education: Toleration and Recognition

To consider what kinds of multicultural education are defensible, we need to use the term *multicultural* in a way that is not polemical or question-begging. Anything multicultural is sometimes said to rely on a belief in moral relativism. Tying multicultural education to moral relativism indefensibly narrows the use of the term and thereby prejudices multicultural education in many people's minds (both for and against). *Multicultural*, as I use it here, refers to a state of schooling, society, or the world that contains many cultures that affect one another by virtue of the interactions of people who identify with or rely upon these cultures. A culture consists of patterns of thinking, speaking, and acting that are associated with a human community larger than a few families.

Multicultural schools and societies are by no means new. As interdependence, communication, and commerce have expanded, most societies and the world have become increasingly multicultural. Individuals themselves are multicultural; they rely upon many cultures, not only one, in living their lives. Individuals are also more than the sum of their cultural identities; they are creative agents who use many cultural resources to live lives that are not simply the product of external cultural forces. Individual identities can therefore express diverse, inter dynamic cultures and they can also express their own creative way of interpreting those cultures.

To force anyone to choose between being multicultural and being a free agent is therefore a false forced choice. We must not assume that any individual is completely constituted by a combination of cultural identities. People can creatively constitute their identities, but they cannot do so *de novo*. People are born within complex social contexts, and they become human agents by interacting with other people within culturally loaded contexts. Human creativity and choice operate against a background of interactive and dynamic cultural resources. Cultures offer contexts of choice,<sup>3</sup> but since human beings are creative multicultural agents, they can reinterpret the various contexts of choice in which they live.

A standard debate over how best to respond to diverse cultural resources and

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3. "Familiarity with a culture determines the boundaries of the imaginable. Sharing in a culture, being part of it, determines the limits of the feasible." Joseph Raz and Avishai Margalit, "National Self-Determination," in *Ethics in the Public Domain: Essays in the Morality of Law and Politics*, by Joseph Raz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 119.

identities within a single democracy often poses a stark choice between two options. The first is privatizing differences in order to realize a public realm unified around principles—such as equal liberty and opportunity—that are often (misleadingly) called culturally neutral principles. The second option is publicly recognizing differences and thereby dividing the public realm into equally valuable but separatist cultural group identities. The two options offer very different understandings of the nature of citizenship and mutual respect among individuals who identify with various cultural groups. Either citizens should tolerate their cultural differences by privatizing them and acting in public as if cultural differences do not exist, or they should respect their cultural differences by publicly recognizing them and treating all as equally valuable but separate group identities.

The first response to multiculturalism is often identified as supporting liberal values, which are considered culturally neutral, and the second response as opposing them and substituting culturally specific values for culturally neutral ones. This opposition between toleration and recognition, as I argue in *Democratic Education*, is misleading. Also misleading is the contrast between culturally specific and culturally neutral values. No values are culturally neutral in the sense of being equally conducive or acceptable to all cultures. Yet some values can be defended from the vantage point of many—even if not all—cultures that are common in and across democracies. The latter phenomenon—which might be called cross-cultural principles—should not be confused with culturally neutral principles. Toleration and recognition, moreover, are not diametrically opposed. In their most democratically defensible forms, toleration and recognition of cultural diversity are compatible.

Toleration at its best implies that individuals be given the right to practice their cultural differences in private, but it does not require citizens or states to treat individuals as if their cultural differences were irrelevant to their public standing.<sup>4</sup> Recognition at its best implies respect for various cultural differences—for example, by integrating the cultural contributions of diverse groups into the history curriculum—but recognition does not entail treating all cultural practices or

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4. See Susan Mendus. *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism*. London: Macmillan, 1989.



contributions to history as equally valuable.<sup>5</sup> Taken at their best, toleration and public recognition are compatible in both theory and practice.

Of course, some practices that are defended on grounds of toleration or recognition may be indefensible. Tolerating or recognizing the equal value of a cultural practice such as female genital mutilation when it is a form of torture practiced on young girls is not what toleration or recognition justifiably calls for. A democratic educational system has a responsibility to recognize racist and other discriminating ideologies for what they are, and not treat them as having positive public value in the school curriculum or elsewhere in public life just because some people value them. To be even minimally decent, a democracy cannot tolerate every practice that every cultural group, subgroup, or individual deems desirable on cultural grounds. Democracies need to ask whether cultural practices respect the civic equality of individuals. Civic equality should serve as the guiding principle for applying both toleration and recognition in multicultural contexts.

Democratic education should recognize important cultural contributions of different groups. Democracies also should tolerate diverse cultural practices that may offend some people's sensibilities but that do not violate anyone's rights to civic equality. Toleration and public recognition of cultural differences are, therefore, two different responses to two different sets of issues that arise partly out of cultural differences.

In its educational system, a democracy should not only tolerate cultural differences that are consistent with educating children for civic equality but should also recognize the cultural contributions of different groups. Why? Because such recognition helps express the civic equality of (and respect for) members of different cultural groups. A democracy that aims to educate children for civic equality, therefore, must not be opposed to publicly recognizing cultural differences, as any good multicultural curriculum reflects, yet it must be opposed to ceding rights to cultural groups to engage in practices that oppress individuals (whether insiders or outsiders to the group) in the name of recognizing cultural difference.

A defensible response of democratic education to multicultural diversity,

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5. See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25–74.

therefore, incorporates both toleration and recognition. It rejects the dichotomy “privatize and tolerate or publicly recognize” when it comes to terms with the fundamental phenomenon of a world in which all societies and individual identities are increasingly multicultural. What sorts of steps should educational systems take both to recognize and to tolerate multicultural diversity? I will outline the approaches of recognition and toleration, both of which are important to any successful multicultural education initiative, but each of which has a special role and therefore independent ethical relevance.

### **3. Public Recognition through Curricular Design**

“Old” minority groups, including indigenous groups and historically oppressed groups like African Americans, have special claims on the shape of national educational curricula. For them, the principle of recognition has a historical dimension: it requires that the wrongs they suffered as well as the goods they contributed to society be acknowledged alongside those of the majority groups. The implications are enormous for democratic education, since most of the curriculum, as well as the culture of the school more generally, needs to be alert to the demands of multicultural recognition.

To teach U.S. history, for instance, largely without reference to the experiences, including the oppressions and the contributions of Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans, constitutes a compound failure. The failure is intellectual: that of not recognizing the historical role of many different cultures, the contributions along with the oppressions of individuals who identify with those cultures. But the failure is more than intellectual; it is also a moral failure judged by democratic principles. It morally damages democracy—and expresses a lack of respect for individuals by virtue of their group identity—to convey a false impression that their ancestors have not suffered wrongs or contributed goods in making society what it is today.

Why do historical wrongs inflicted on members of minority groups need to be recognized alongside their contributions? Again, the reasons are both intellectual and ethical. Learning the history of the oppression of slaves, for example, in the United States is crucial to understanding the past and analyzing contemporary social realities. Assessing the past and present also depends on coming to terms with oppression. Democratic ethics cannot do without a citizenry that is capable of

being critical of its past partly (but not only) in order to construct a better future.

Something analogous can be said about the value of including women's voices in the curriculum for both intellectual and ethical reasons, which are closely connected. Like other oppressed groups, and partly owing to their oppression, women have some distinct experiences and sensibilities that call for recognition. When textbooks excluded women's voices and experiences, they conveyed the false impression that women have contributed little or nothing to the cultural resources that should be accessible to everyone in a democratic society. Conveying this impression is also an ethical wrong: it imposes an extra burden on members of oppressed groups, making it more difficult for them to be empowered to share as civic equals in shaping their society. Negative stereotyping of women and minority groups is exacerbated by their absence from, or negative stereotyping within, school curricula and educational practices more generally. Men as well as women develop falsely unequal impressions of their civic worth, public standing, and social entitlements.

Even apart from any probable effects, excluding the contributions of different cultures constitutes a moral failing in its own right. Exclusion represents a failure to respect those individuals as equal citizens who identify with less dominant cultures. The most basic premise of democratic education—respect for all individuals as civic equals—calls for a history that recognizes both the oppressions and the social contributions of individuals.

To overlook the ways in which minorities have been oppressed by, or contributed to, society is to disrespect not only those cultures but, more fundamentally, also the individuals who identify with the cultures. Democracy owes equal respect to individuals as civic equals, not to groups, but disrespecting some groups conveys disrespect to the individuals who identify with those groups.

Equal respect can be manifest in various parts of a school curriculum. Literature can no longer be taught as a field that belongs exclusively, or even largely, to “dead white males.” Toni Morrison takes her place beside the greatest male novelists, as the literary voice of an African-American woman, but not only as that. Morrison is also a great literary voice who can be appreciated across many cultures. Such cross-cultural appreciation is another contribution of multicultural recognition and a manifestation of equal respect for individuals, whether they are women or men, this color, ethnicity, religion, or that. Equal respect entails the

inclusion of books such as *Beloved* in school curricula that represent the oppression of groups in literary as well as historical form.

Multicultural aims for the curriculum legitimately extend beyond history and literature. Some schools, for example, make it a point of teaching math in a multicultural way by representing different cultures in the word problems assigned to students. Traditional math can be well taught in ways that capture the cultural imaginations of students.<sup>6</sup> Nothing is lost and something valuable is gained in the process. Schools can sensitively introduce students to different cultures by recognizing how different groups celebrate the New Year, and by analyzing both the similarities and differences in holiday celebrations.

Once again, the intellectual and the ethical can mutually reinforce one another, as they should, in democratic education without infringing on anyone's legitimate freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Democratic education supports a "politics of recognition" based on respect for individuals and their equal rights as citizens, not on deference to tradition, proportional representation of groups, or the survival rights of cultures.<sup>8</sup> The practice of history textbook publishing in the United States has often perverted this politics of recognition. Succumbing to strong market and political pressures, publishers sometimes produce history textbooks that include only positive references to traditional American heroes and only enough references to people of politically prominent ethnicities to achieve proportional representation. These practices are counterproductive to engaging students in learning about the history and politics of

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6. See some examples at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20101017014420/http://mathforum.org/alejandre/mathfair/index.html>.

7. A variety of ideas regarding multicultural curricula, including the treatment of holidays, can be found at

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110527063450/http://www.kidlink.org/kidspace/start.php?HoldNode=3459&HoldNav=3459> and

<https://web.archive.org/web/20020211011533/http://jeffconet.jeffco.k12.co.us/passport/>

8. Compare the perspective of Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 25–37. Taylor claims that cultural communities are entitled to survival, protected by the state, as long as the cultures respect basic individual rights. (Taylor does not consider cases where so few people want the culture to survive that it would take a heroic effort on the part of the state, even against its own citizens' reasonable democratic will, to secure its survival.)

their society, an engagement that is essential to teaching the skills and virtues of democratic citizenship and respecting every individual as an equal citizen.

Practices like these are not the inevitable product of a democratic process. Democratic processes can be, and in some states actually are, more deliberative and more conducive to developing the deliberative skills of democratic citizenship. Several states, Tennessee and Virginia among them, along with various inner-city public schools and elite private schools, have demonstrated this. They were sufficiently impressed to adopt a textbook that can serve as a model for deliberative democratic education. *A History of US* by Joy Hakim presents American history as a series of narratives that are inclusive and accurate.<sup>9</sup> With an engaging and broadly accessible style, its content is relatively complex.

Equally important, the narratives highlight the relevance to democratic citizenship of choices that individuals and organized groups make in politics.

When texts and teachers present narratives of ethical choices in politics, they set the stage for students to think about those choices as democratic citizens. A multicultural history should not imply—let alone claim—that vastly different beliefs and practices are equally valuable. Diverse beliefs and practices are subjects of understanding and evaluation. Appreciating the importance of a multicultural curriculum is only the prologue to teaching skills of understanding and evaluation. The value of any belief or practice cannot simply be assumed; it must be assessed.

Appreciation, understanding, and evaluation are three capacities of democratic citizenship that multicultural education can cultivate. Classrooms that include students from diverse cultural backgrounds can facilitate such cultivation, especially if teachers engage their students in deliberating about their commonalities and differences. Teachers who are attuned to the desirability of deliberation in multicultural classrooms, and find ways of making such deliberation productive of appreciation, understanding, and evaluation of commonalities and differences, are models of democratic educators. This is because open-minded learning in a multicultural setting—to which students bring diverse presuppositions and convictions—is a prelude to democratic deliberation

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9. See a discussion of this book in comparison to other trends in teaching history in the essay by Alexander Stille, “The Betrayal of History,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 11, 1998, pp. 15–20.

in a multicultural society and world. Democratic deliberation, and the open-minded teaching that anticipates it, encourages all citizens to appreciate, understand, and assess differences that are matters of mutual concern.

#### **4. Tolerating Diversity without Endorsing Every Difference**

Not all matters that are important to us as individuals are—or should be—of mutual concern for citizens in a democracy. Democratic education calls for public recognition when its absence would be discriminatory or disrespectful—as in the case of textbooks that exclude the contributions and experiences of oppressed minorities or women. Some cultural practices, such as whether or how individuals worship, should not be matters of mutual concern among citizens. For people to be free to live their own lives, some of their cultural practices must also be free from public regulation and even scrutiny. Multicultural education, therefore, should not suggest that every cultural difference needs to be a matter of mutual concern.

To the extent that there is a mutual concern about religious worship, for example, it is directed not at appreciating, understanding, and assessing competing cultural practices but at tolerating them. The mutual concern is that citizens tolerate religious differences that do not harm others, not that they endorse or otherwise assess or mutually justify those differences by a common ethical standard. To put the same point somewhat differently, toleration of diverse ways of worshiping is what is mutually justifiable in a deliberative democracy, not the diverse ways of worshiping themselves. A multicultural world includes a wide range of conceptions of the good life, none of which needs to be mutually justifiable to all citizens. Why? In a decent democracy, the state does not dictate or regulate belief. (If the manifestation of belief directly harms others—for example, by leading people to sacrifice others for the sake of salvation—then coercion may be justified but only when aimed at protecting the equal liberty of others.) For many people, religious belief constitutes some of their deepest ethical commitments. To coerce or regulate such commitments is to not respect the persons who hold them. In addition, the state has no expertise in deciding the “right” way to worship. It, therefore, should leave such decisions to individuals to decide according to their own deepest convictions. Freedom of worship, therefore, can be considered a basic right of democratic citizenship and honored as such in democratic education.

A democratic state takes toleration seriously to the extent that it does not impose ways of worshiping and the like on students in publicly subsidized schools. It, therefore, does not publicly recognize one way or the other of worshiping as proper or improper in its own right. It leaves citizens free to worship as they choose provided that they respect the equal liberty of others. Worship is then “privatized” only in the very specific sense that it is not a matter of state endorsement or recognition of its “rightness.” Worship still can be a public matter in the broad sense of being an overtly social activity, which is publicly protected by law.

Hard questions arise in multicultural education with regard to religious freedom—for example, when individuals or groups want to manifest their religiosity in various ways within public schools. Should a democratic state tolerate manifestations of religion within public schools? Religious toleration is extremely important to the just treatment of all minorities who diverge from the dominant ways of worship. But religious toleration becomes especially salient in the way in which a democratic government treats recent immigrant populations with unfamiliar ways of manifesting their religiosity. These groups typically do not demand a separate school system or public recognition (in the sense of endorsement) of their particular religions. What they typically do demand is toleration based on an equitable rather than an unfairly skewed interpretation of the toleration principle. The demand for a fair application of democratic principles applies to decisions as basic as who will be educated and how. Recent French history offers a paradigmatic example of public conflict over what constitutes a fair interpretation of the principle of toleration.

The “affair of the scarf” began in France when three Muslim girls attended their public high school in Creil, France, wearing hijab or chador—head coverings that are demanded by some interpretations of orthodox Islam. French public schools are, by law and centuries-long tradition, secular. A 1937 law prohibits the wearing of religious symbols in government-run schools, but yarmulkes and crucifixes have been permitted on grounds that they are “inconspicuous” religious symbols.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, given its greater unfamiliarity to mainstream French culture, the hijab was considered “conspicuous.” The principal in Creil insisted that the three girls

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10. New York Times, November 12, 1989, p. 5, and December 3, 1989, p. 17.

remove their hijab or be expelled from class. When they refused and were expelled from class, the controversy became national, and soon international, by its audience.

Some democrats defend expulsion because religious garb that symbolizes civic inequality—not least the inequality of women—must be excluded from public schools. A democracy is responsible for publicly educating children to become civic equals, and one way of doing so is to keep all differentiating dress that symbolizes civic inequality out of public schools. Other democrats respond by denying that the hijab must be interpreted in a way that blocks educating Muslim girls for civic equality, which after all is the aim of democratic education. These democrats oppose expelling children for wearing religious symbols when they are otherwise willing to be publicly educated as civic equals. They find the expulsion wrong in principle and counterproductive in practice to democratic ends.<sup>11</sup> In an equal but opposite response to those who defend the expulsion, these democrats agree that a democracy is responsible for publicly educating children to become civic equals despite their religious differences, but they argue that religious toleration within public schools is a principled means toward this important end.

A democratic rationale for tolerating religious differences, as this example suggests, is to help citizens understand that many disagreements in public life are compatible with sharing a society as civic equals. It is important to note that this rationale is not well captured by the notion of privatization. To tolerate the wearing of yarmulkes, crucifixes, and hijab in public schools would be neither to privatize these religious symbols nor to publicly endorse them. Rather, it would be to demonstrate that religious differences can be accommodated within public schools as long as they do not block the aim of educating children as civic equals. The controversy over the hijab can then be viewed as one of democratic disagreement: agreement on the end of civic equality but disagreement on the justifiable and practical means of achieving the end.

A question that called for democratic deliberation was the following: Would the willingness or the refusal of the French public school system to tolerate the hijab be more conducive to educating Muslim girls for civic equality? If educators and citizens alike publicly ask this question, then they can publicly deliberate over their

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11. For a variety of views, see Susan Moller Okin and respondents, in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).



disagreements, and their answers—even if divergent, as answers often are in a democracy that protects free speech—will be guided by a manifestly shared commitment to educating for civic equality. What policy within the range of options available to French society is more likely to aid in educating Muslim girls for civic equality? This question is very different from the racist response of those who argued for the immediate expulsion of all Muslim immigrants from France and the closing of the borders to people who do not share a French pedigree.

Multicultural education can demonstrate that symbols have different meanings to different people in different contexts. A hijab does not need to be viewed as a symbol of gender inequality, even if it is now widely viewed as such.<sup>12</sup> The meaning of symbols varies and changes over time and in cultural contexts. Recognizing various symbolic interpretations as reasonable is a prelude to considering how a system of public schooling can best aid in educating children of different religious and cultural backgrounds for greater civic equality.

Some critics disparagingly call toleration of this sort “funny-hat liberalism.”<sup>13</sup> They argue that it is little more than a pretense for accommodating ways of life that dissent from liberal orthodoxy. The price paid by orthodox Muslim parents for agreeing to educate their girls on tolerant terms may be a dilution of an orthodox religious way of life. Even if this is the case, it does not damage the position of democratic education. Democratic education does not aim to preserve or even to be equally conducive to all ways of life. Were the hijab accommodated in French public schools in the spirit of democratic education, the schools would do so for the sake of educating all children as equal citizens with diverse religious views and practices, not for the sake of perpetuating orthodox Islam (or any other secular or religious way of life).

Toleration in the service of civic equality cannot claim to support cultural or religious ways of life on their own terms, since not all cultural or religious

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12. For an Islamic perspective on headscarves, and on “the affair of the scarf,” see Aziza Y. al-Hibri, “Is Western Patriarchal Feminism Good for Third World/Minority Women?” in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 41–46.

13. For a critique conveyed by this term and a discussion of the hijab case, see Anna Elisabetta Galeotti, “Citizenship and Equality: The Place for Toleration,” *Political Theory* 21 (November 1993), pp. 585–605.

perspectives embrace toleration. Toleration is not culturally neutral, and saying so is not a critique of toleration. A culture itself does not have a right to equal support by a democratic government just because it is a culture. Democratic governments owe children equal rights to be educated for civic equality (and as civic equals). If some cultural perspectives would deny children this right, democratic education will find itself at odds with parts of these cultures. But democratic education need not, therefore, be at odds with all of any culture. It is the responsibility of publicly supported schools to educate all students as civic equals. By asking how best to educate the Muslim girls for civic equality, democrats challenge themselves to apply the principle of toleration in an equitable manner, which does not unnecessarily exclude some children because their religious symbols are more conspicuous or controversial in their meaning than others.

Conditions like those that gave rise to the “affair of the scarf” have led many critics of multicultural education to ask whether public school systems can successfully strive for civic equality under conditions of cultural diversity. The analysis above suggests that a lot depends on the nature of the diversity and the democratic response. The challenge of combining religious toleration with an education for civic equality is greater, for example, the less willing orthodox religious parents are to educate girls equally with boys to prepare them for public life and the professions.

The analysis above also suggests that the challenge of multiculturalism to democratic education depends far less on the extent to which the group is newly arrived or not in the society, or indigenous or immigrant, than on the extent to which its commitments and identity are compatible with civic equality. “Civic equality within what society?” is another question to ask of any government that restricts the cultural content of schooling to the dominant culture or cultures. I cannot pursue this question at length in this essay, but I can say, based on the analysis above, that toleration and recognition, taken together, leave room for great cultural variation in democratic education. Civic equality within any and all democracies is what democratic education supports. Any group that is willing and able to constitute itself as a democracy, and provide an education that aims at civic equality for students, has full ethical standing. Indigenous groups that constitute themselves democratically, therefore, can make strong claims for educating their

own children in their own culture and consistently for civic equality. To the extent that dominant groups fail to educate children for civic equality, their claims over other groups are without ethical standing. Unity without the aim of civic equality is an authoritarian, not a democratic, value.

Democratic education, therefore, depends on a commitment to civic equality by diverse groups in diverse societies. A commitment to civic equality, in turn, depends in practice on interpreting toleration and recognition in fair ways so as to provide all children, whatever their ethnicity, religion, race, or gender, with the education that they deserve. Diversity per se does not make striving for civic equality difficult. A lack of commitment to civic equality and fair accommodation of diversity does.

### **5. Challenges to the Aim of Civic Equality**

The largest normative question remains: Do some multicultural conditions successfully challenge the democratic framework itself, and suggest the need for a guiding principle other than civic equality? I have already suggested that the framework of democratic education is a kind of principled pragmatism (or what I have also called “pragmatic idealism”). It does not insist on realizing civic equality against all odds. Rather, it aims at civic equality and, therefore, judges to what extent (and how best) it can be realized in particular contexts, all of which are nonideal but some are far less ideal than others.

Some democratic contexts may be so far from ideal for democratic education, however, as to challenge the very aim of civic equality itself. Consider, for example, a democracy where the dominant nationality is far more liberal and democratic toward its own than toward other subordinate and historically oppressed nationalities, who are themselves relatively illiberal and undemocratic. The United States vis-à-vis Native Americans and Israel relative to Palestinians are two complex and troubling examples for democratic education. The United States devolved educational (and other political) authority to the local level of Native American tribes, but it is far from clear that progress toward civic equality (internal to the tribes or between them and the larger society) has resulted. Nor is it clear what a better alternative might have been (or is today).

In Israel's case, many people who otherwise disagree agree that two culturally

distinct nations—Israel and Palestine—are needed for minimum stability in the area. Moreover, the absence of ongoing violence is a necessary (but not sufficient) precondition for teaching children to tolerate rather than hate one another, and to recognize each nation's right to exist. Even with two nations, however, the challenge of educating children for civic equality will be formidable, since the nations will probably be radically unequal in liberty and opportunity, an issue that democratic education does not adequately address when it focuses only on education within the boundaries of a single nation. The education systems in these two possible neighboring states will also have to find ways to recognize and tolerate minority students from the other (formerly adversary) nationality. The Israeli-Palestinian example is important not only for what it can tell us about the preconditions of educating children for civic equality—some peaceful and minimally unified society is necessary. The example also alerts us to the larger challenge of educating children to respect members of other societies as human beings who are equally deserving of civic equality, but who are denied such standing because they were born or raised somewhere else.

Many groups in many societies, including many democracies, do not accept the principle of civic equality. Indeed, many find the principle threatening to their valued way of life. What is the justifiable response of democratic education to such groups? We need to distinguish between the demands of insular groups who peacefully ask (almost) only to be left alone and those of separatist groups who typically insist, often violently, on far more. The Amish are a paradigmatic case of the former kind of (almost always agrarian) group, who ask for no welfare benefits, do not vote, and want above all to live a communal way of life free from the political authority of the larger democracy. They expect to be protected against violence, and they pose no threat of violence to the larger society. In this sense, the “social contract” that they request is quite reciprocal.

Peaceful groups like the Amish pose a problem for democratic education only if and when (as is often the case) their educational system offers far less preparation for exercising one's freedom and opportunity—which was afforded some parents who insist on denying it to their children—than the education that would otherwise be offered by the larger society. Democratic principles are compromised if the group is permitted to educate their children as they see fit, with no constraints

whatsoever, but the compromise has far fewer ramifications for the larger democracy than a capitulation to the demands of a violent separatist group. Nonetheless, democracies do compromise an important principle of educating all children within their borders to the status of equal citizens when they decide to exempt some insular groups from this democratically justifiable requirement. When democracies do make such exemptions, they should recognize that they are effectively placing the value of a particular communal way of life above the value of a democratic education.

The problem posed to democratic education by violent separatist groups is far greater to the extent that they threaten the unity of the society and are likely to teach their children intolerance and disrespect for their neighbors. Deferring to the demands of a group simply because it represents a different culture cannot be justified by democratic principles. Only pragmatic necessity can justify such deference on grounds that no better alternative is available. The goodness of alternatives must be measured by defensible democratic principles, not by the aims or claims of the violent separatist group. If possible, a legitimate democratic state facing an intolerant separatist movement should effectively defend its authority with the aim of guaranteeing greater civic equality to all than would be afforded by the separatist alternative. One important means of guaranteeing greater civic equality is offering all children a publicly subsidized education that promotes tolerance and mutual respect across many multicultural lines.

Some historically oppressed groups are viewed as challenging the aim of teaching all children as civic equals when they actually further it. They distrust the authority of the democratic government that has treated them oppressively in the past. Rarely is oppression overcome once and for all, and the legacy of a long history of oppression must be taken seriously by any decent democracy. When historically oppressed minorities press claims on public education, they often do so in the name of civic equality. Some historical inequalities, especially those that have been compounded by decades of slavery, *de jure* and then *de facto* discrimination, create conditions under which equal treatment cannot constitute treatment as an equal.

The claim that equal treatment is all that is needed may be a sincere interpretation of the ideal of an education for civic equality, but it is not an adequate interpretation. It is naïve to think that nothing more or different is needed to

educate African-American children as civic equals than newly arrived Swedish-American immigrants.<sup>14</sup> Neither toleration nor recognition of cultural contributions is likely to suffice to educate children who continue to be negatively and falsely stereotyped by large segments of society simply by virtue of the color of their skin.

The situation of identity groups whose members continue to suffer from negative stereotyping and consequent discriminations calls not for an alternative to the aim of civic equality but, rather, for creative interpretations of what civic equality demands of educational practices and institutions, and what can be realized over time in particular contexts. The democratic defense of civic equality itself requires more ambitious efforts to attend to the needs of members of perennially disadvantaged groups.

### **Conclusion**

Educating children for civic equality is an ambitious aim for any democracy, and not one that by its very nature can ever be realized once and for all. More rather than less civic equality is all that a democrat can realistically aim for over time. If more civic equality is better than less, then democrats have a guiding principle that can help us evaluate educational practices and institutions. Striving for civic equality in democracies under multicultural conditions is not an all-or-nothing end. It is a question of practical judgment as to what educational practices are more or less conducive to greater civic equality.

The practical implications of civic equality, moreover, vary across groups. The claims to civic equality advanced by different groups cannot be treated identically because the content of their demands and their relationship to democratic ideals are far from identical.

Some groups—indigenous groups and other minorities with a domestic history that extends back in time, for example—have legitimate claims to be recognized for

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14. For data on contemporary discrimination and negative stereotyping of African Americans, see David O. Sears, Jim Sidanius, and Lawrence Bobo, eds., *Racialized Politics: The Debate about Racism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

contributions to the country's history. Some of these same groups, but not others, also are entitled to educational aid to overcome the injustice of accumulated disadvantage. What such justifiable demands share is the aim of educating children for civic equality.

Although I have not had the time to catalog the full range of justifiable demands of cultural groups, it is worth noting that long-term linguistic minorities may lay claim to special resources to help preserve their language and culture if they themselves are too poor to afford to do so on equal footing with other citizens. This is because civic equality does not permit a state to deprive its less affluent citizens, against their will, of the institutional structures on which their cultural and linguistic practices have come to rest.

Some immigrant groups may require little more than toleration and well-trained teachers who know how to help children learn a new language and adjust to a strange and likely somewhat scary environment. Well-trained teachers are often no small feat to find, especially when the profession of teaching is underpaid relative to others of similar social value.

Relatively affluent and well-educated immigrants pose less of a challenge than the more common situation of children from poor and uneducated immigrant families. The children of affluent immigrant parents may need little special aid in education. Yet they, too, have justifiable claims to recognize their cultural heritage in the teaching of world history and literature, for example. Democratic education undermines the ideal of civic equality if it conveys to students that only citizens of their society are deserving of equal respect and fair treatment. The more interrelated and interdependent democratic societies are in the world, the more important the full range of multicultural contributions becomes in democratic education. In all these examples, the aim is to educate all children as far as feasible to equal citizenship.

Civic equality and individual freedom, I have shown, are both defensible and desirable aims of publicly funded education. Part of the responsibility of a democratic society to ensure the adequate education of all citizens consists of providing political opportunities in which citizens who identify with diverse groups can deliberate democratically about their differences. Democratic education responds to these contextual challenges of multicultural groups within a society,

and to diverse multicultural societies, by supporting democratic deliberation within societies, among other important matters, about how public schooling can best educate all children as civic equals.

Multicultural conditions, as we have seen, can challenge the very aim of educating children for civic equality. Democracies are variously multicultural, and the varieties of groups make a difference in the kind of education and the progress toward civic equality that can realistically be expected at any time. When groups deny the value of civic equality, democracies cannot simply deny their responsibility to further civic equality for children of these groups. The interests of children must be considered, which is yet another reason any settlement with insular or separatist groups should be assessed on democratic grounds that aim to treat all individuals as civic equals. Democratic education is committed not to tolerating but to opposing educational programs that perpetuate civic inequality or intolerance.

Unity and diversity in multicultural education, therefore, go together, not like love and marriage, since democracies are not happy or unhappy families; they are far more diverse than most families. Unity and diversity in education go together like citizens and democracies. Toleration and recognition of diversity—within principled limits—make democratic unity possible. Disagreements about the limits of diversity fuel creative and destructive tensions within the unity. The more the creative tensions overwhelm the destructive ones, the better off a democracy will be and the more constructive work democratic educators will have cut out for them.





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