on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

revisiting "citizenship under fire"

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This short essay relates the impact of war on democratic and civic education to similar impacts generated by persistent polarization and extremism. Some misguided responses to both are discussed, especially those that entrench nationalistic sentiments and undermine democratic attitudes, as well as responses focused on singling out some identity groups as suspect. A normative case is made for addressing conspiracism and polarization through an intentional effort to build a civic community committed to sound epistemic practices.

Keywords: civic education, democratic education, expansive education, polarization, wartime

I moved to the United States from Israel, where war is weaved into the fabric of civic life, where it affects political structures and partisan positions, businesses, schools, and private life. At that time, the second intifada was raging, a time of active hostilities, and I was looking forward to a quiet period with my young family in bucolic Princeton. That was in mid-August 2001. Two weeks later, after the 9/11 attacks, and in the ensuing months and years that saw the evolving 'war on terror,' I began to notice the similarities between the two countries, and the parallel effect that war has on civil society. I was thinking not so much about the justification for the war or the acts of the combatants, not of the decisions made by politicians or soldiers, but rather on how the conditions of war affect democratic life.

In my 2006 book I focused on three main shifts that take place in civil society during war. First, war is seen as a male pursuit, and societies at war are pulled toward a traditionalist vision of gendered roles, even in places like Israel where universal conscription has young people of all genders serve in the military (and see Engelmann et al., 2022, especially chapter 11 and 13, for other historical examples. See also work by Lynn Davies, in Fano Morrissey, n.d.). Second, war heightens the tendency to identify and clearly demarcate who belongs and who does not belong, and generates or strengthens clear divisions of 'us' and 'them' often based on identity features like ethnicity, religion, immigration status and the like. Third, war infiltrates the public discourse and shapes it, constricting the scope of acceptable topics and permissible views, and with its demands to support the troops or express loyalty to the country or support for the mission, it narrows the scope of both the questions citizens tend to ask and of the answers they tend to tolerate. My work in the past, and this essay, center on the role of schools in diffusing these tendencies. Given that the civic effects I identify are typical of active war, as well as (in slightly different manifestations) in the vaguer 'war on terror' contexts, and even in the civil strife that is typical of hyper-polarized societies, I refer here to all these partly-overlapping contexts.

Clearly, the civil effects of war, even if common, vary in their specific manifestations across different societies (see Roldán Vera & Fuchs, 2018). It matters whether the war takes place down

the street or across the ocean; the justifications for the war and its actual progression can change its civic impacts; and of course, the democratic culture in the country is the context in which war takes place, and the context which war persistently changes as it drags on. Within this spectrum, the typical effects of war on civil society generate conditions that affect schools – their work, and the public expectations from them – and to which schooling systems can succumb or respond in a more intentional manner. To support teachers and schools in committing to sustaining democratic practices and attitudes in the face of wartime counter-pressures, a community will need to rely on a shared vision of the future, even if a thin or limited one.

In early work I focused on practices that schools can develop and implement to create a robust and stable democratic culture, one which can withstand the pressures of war or even reverse them. 'Expansive education' or the intentional effort to expose and address the narrowed public discourse was suggested as an outline for a democratic civic education in times of war. In its essence this effort is a recommitment to the core practices of democratic civic education, which are shifted to address directly the narrowed, chauvinistic, and exclusionary attitudes wartime tends to generate. As Joel Westheimer argues in *Civic Education and the Rise of Populist Nationalism*, "A well-functioning democracy benefits from classroom practices that teach students to recognize ambiguity and conflict in factual content, to see human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and to embrace debate and deliberation as a cornerstone of democratic societies" (Westheimer, 2019, p. 11). Westheimer highlights three practices which together help develop and ground democratic citizens, namely, "Teach students how to ask questions, expose students to multiple perspectives, and root instruction in local contexts" (Westheimer, 2019, p. 11). These and similar educational practices, which are already common in many good schools, help young people develop democratic habits of mind and the civic attitudes which are necessary for citizens in a democracy, and for a functioning democracy more broadly.

In this short paper I thus ask, how can schools intervene to sustain democratic civic attitudes? Working within the boundaries of parental expectations, legal and policy regulation, and societally polarized and sometimes entrenched attitudes, how can schools help students envision a peaceful future?

It is broadly agreed by researchers that simply providing access to education has some pacifying effect at the community level in itself, although the specific effects on individuals are mixed (Ostby et al., 2019). Further educational attainment turns communities toward greater investment in their economic development and other internal pursuits. At the same time tensions among subgroups can persist, and individuals can sustain anti-democratic or belligerent visions. Therefore an intentional effort to strengthen democratic understanding and attitudes seems necessary not just for their pacifying effects but just as urgently for sustaining democratic attitudes in civil society as the nation is engaged in war.

There is some clear overlap, therefore, between providing access to education and providing good instruction in core democratic practices, and the pacifying and democratic outcomes that good, equal schooling can provide. Still, we see in some countries expectations that schools do more to address war directly, particularly by instilling patriotic sentiments and by strengthening students' commitment to identify with their in-group and to reject or hate the enemy, the out-group. Education can thus be used to sustain war or to advance peace, and especially to promote peaceful or belligerent social and civic attitudes among young people. Schools are leading among other social institutions that do the same, and their effect is woven together with other social effects; they are

also managed and regulated by political and professional leadership, and do not operate on their own accord. But even given these limitations, it is important to recognize the power of schools to affect the attitudes of young people and in this way to make either war or peace easier to envision and to participate in, and therefore more likely. In the next section I review what I see as general guidelines for schools' legitimate response to war and to wartime citizenship. I touch on two related wartime contexts, namely, broad responses to wartime changes to civic attitudes and practices, as well as the concrete and more individualized responses that were spawned by the extensive 'war on terror' in the past two decades.

A Note on Internal Polarization and Domestic Extremism

One familiar civic effect of war is the public tendency to express support for political leaders engaged in war, or the 'rally 'round the flag' effect that wars tend to generate, at least for a time. This effect, as many have noted, stems from an urgent sense of connection to the country which is seen as a protector of its citizens, and it often generates waves of patriotism that can be reflected in the polling booth as well.

Politicians are familiar with this social-psychological effect of war, and they know how to use it to their advantage. This phenomenon is not new. What seems newer, or at least revamped these days, is the willingness of elected officials in recent years to generate similar effects internally. To mark the division of 'us' and 'them' not in terms of national enemies across the border, but in terms of political rivals within the nation. Increasingly, political polarization allows us to think about our compatriots, neighbors, and family members across ideological divides as though they were a different type of person, different enough to not care about, different enough to hate or to keep a distance from, and in some extreme instances, different enough to harm with little concern or regret. In this limited sense, the extreme polarization which typifies many democratic societies today presents schools with similar challenges to those posed by war.

The Boundaries of Schools' Actions *1*

To sustain democratic and peaceful attitudes in the face of wartime pressures, schools should focus on an approach that addresses all students rather than targeting some. They should aim to cultivate both personal capacities and social ties, a goal that aligns both with the general democratic mission of schools and with specific pacifying and depolarizing aims. Schools are best equipped to support civic development and the cultivation of democratic and humanistic attitudes through pedagogical practices and curricular materials already ingrained in practices across both elementary and secondary schools.

Schools are positioned to implement what experts call bottom-up approaches, which focus on those who are vulnerable to extremist recruitment, and on building personal and communal resilience to resist radicalization (Miller-Idriss, 2021; Grossman et al., 2022). The focus on vulnerabilities that can make people more receptive to extreme ideas draws attention to the need to offer alternative pathways for young people, pathways that would replace the need to turn to extremist ideologies or belligerent views.

Within the context of the vague and ongoing 'war on terror,' some countries, notably the UK, have developed policies that require that teachers identify and refer these young people to law enforcement. These can be useful in specific contexts, but as a broad approach they stand to

undermine the trusting relationship between teacher and student, which is necessary for learning and which is also a pre-condition for the student confiding their needs to the teacher (see Open Society Justice Initiative, 2015). Many minority and immigrant communities, as well as communities of color, have strained relationships with law enforcement, and a referral can reasonably raise concerns for the student and their family member, regardless of the justification for the referral (Breen-Smyth, 2014).

In addition to concerns about community/law enforcement relations, addressing potential vulnerability to extremism requires that teachers (and others) attend to the cognitive aspects of radicalization, or in other words, that they assess what is happening inside students' heads. Of course, this process is already a regular part of a teacher's day, whether she is attempting to assess a student's understanding or is concerned about their mood or motivation. But when it comes to assessing views, beliefs, and positions for the purpose of referral to law enforcement or raising concerns and reporting in other ways, teachers are put in a difficult position.

Given common contemporary processes of radicalization, it is evident that schools have limited access to detecting and understanding students' state of mind and political leanings. Normatively speaking, and beyond specific legal frameworks, policies addressing schools' responses to wartime challenges should recognize that policing students' views, beliefs, and attitudes can significantly chill their democratic and civic tendency to express their views. As a result, they would not be able to develop their voices in such a way that would permit them to see themselves as current and future equal members of a democratic society.

Additionally, monitoring, reporting, or punishing students who are identified as being at risk for radicalization risks further alienating students who are members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. Those students tend to be over-policed and over-punished for their expressive behavior already, and are sometimes identified by other students as 'out-group' members, based on characteristics such as immigration status, religion, ethnicity, or home language. This inequity is true both within and outside of schools, and relates to the responses of diverse authority figures to young (and older) members of marginalized groups. Thus, giving school authorities greater powers over students' expression would further permit discriminating actions against these young people (see Jerome et al., 2019). As a matter of democratic and civic practice, students should feel free to express and share their views in and out of class. The knowledge that they are monitored and could be subject to reporting and punitive measures can hinder the free exchange of ideas, which is necessary both for the development of knowledge, and for the airing and possible correction of mistakes, including extremist, bigoted, or even violent views (see for example Busher & Jerome, 2020).

Parents too might have a claim against schools intervening in their children's views and beliefs. Sometimes students' views are learned at home, shared by parents, or possibly supported by parents who do not share them—what the school could see as extremist views, parents might see as a phase their child is going through, as an exploration, or even as laudable forays into political engagement. If the student is merely thinking and speaking about ideas, and their parents are supportive (whether or not they share the views), a response by the school could overstep the family's legitimately protected boundaries. The recurrent push for 'parents' rights' in the current debate, and legislation, in the United States (Mazariegos & Collins Sullivan, 2022), reflects the possibility that parents who were educated and assimilated into belligerent views of 'us' and 'them,' or who espouse traditional gender roles, would reject schools' attempts to introduce other values and attitudes to their children.

What Can Schools Do to Promote Peace?

The response to war, belligerence, and extremism in schools, should be rooted in schools' democratic civic mission, and connect to its epistemic and social goals. The most important goal for schools, at any time and especially in times of polarization and rising extremism, is to prepare students for their roles as citizens. Strengthening students' capacities to make their voices heard in the democratic context in an informed and effective way, and to listen to others and work in collaboration with them, are at the heart of the work of schools.

A normatively desirable schooling response to the social effects of war should be rooted in an understanding of the epistemic and social conditions of this process, and respond to them using tools that stem from the core mission of schools (see Drerup, 2021). I have argued elsewhere for a focus on epistemic tools, such as media literacy and shared inquiry, as effective ways to address and prevent challenges that arise from polarization as well as radicalization (Ben-Porath, 2023; Ben-Porath, n.d.). An element of contemporary belligerent attitudes which is becoming more prominent and requires attention, is conspiracism and the reliance on mis- and disinformation to propagate hatred and belligerence. Quassim Cassam suggests that to overcome these developments we must use arguments and evidence to rebut conspiracy theories, and educate our children to do so, equipping them with critical thinking skills and intellectual virtues so that they are inoculated against conspiracism. He further suggests that we unmask the propagandistic nature of conspiracy theories, which might lead to embarrassment among those who hold unfounded beliefs (Cassam, 2019). Doing so relies on an intentional and revamped use of existing practices available to schools, focusing on media literacy and the clear exposure of the tools used to distract individuals from true beliefs. These are relevant tools in extending the pacifying effect of schools as well, in that they are aimed at creating and sustaining a shared epistemic community. They are justified forms of intervention, as they are universal (or address all rather than only some students) and stem from the core mission of the school. I do not develop those more here, for lack of space.

Beyond the epistemic aspects of responding to war in school, another core pacifying dimension of schools work to promote peace is perspective taking. This is a vital practice that encourages humanization of those who might seem like 'other' or who belong to an 'out-group.' Taking the perspective of others requires a few steps, which are outlined below.

- A first step to learning to take multiple perspectives is epistemic or informative in nature: students need to recognize who else, beyond those who are like them and their family or immediate peers, lives in the community. This is a typical learning process in the early grades: learning the social geography of one's neighborhood, expanding to learn about communities beyond one's own, and learning about identities, beliefs, practices, backgrounds or other characteristics of others in class, at the school, in the neighborhood or community and beyond it.
- Beyond learning *about* others, students need to learn with others. Openly exchanging views, perspectives, and experiences, helps teach children from a young age about differences and similarities that typify those close to them and those further off (Bruen et al., 2016).
- Finally, in order to benefit from the pacifying and democratizing effects of schooling, students need the opportunity to connect as individuals. They need to learn to relate to diverse others, building civic ties that are both epistemic and social.

Conclusion

The epistemic work of schools, along with the steps we can take to humanize and understand others, can guide the justified and effective work of schools in response to the belligerence that war, along with protracted campaigns like the 'war on terror' as well as the belligerence that arises from extreme polarization, can engender. The focus on critical thinking skills and on epistemic virtues, while itself important, will not do as a solution to the democratic erosion that war brings about. Arguments alone, and the strengthening of children's (or adults') epistemic capacities, help address the social and political conditions that lead to the current fraying of democratic ties, but they need to be supplemented with social and attitudinal work. Motivated reasoning leads many to reject available evidence and to harden their unfounded views (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

The habits of democracy, which are shared, civic, and social, need to be mended before children can use any newly developed critical thinking skills to argue their way into a stronger political union. If democratic habits are developed through a shared process of truth-seeking and open discussion, they can overcome the single-minded pursuit of conspiracies, and the polarizing effects of sorting and mistrust. Sharing the process of information production, assessment, and distribution – sharing the judgement of what is reliable and what should be shared – can produce trust, if done within broad and clear norms of speech and exchange. Learning to assess one's own positions, learning new knowledge, learning to resist extremist, unfounded, conspiratorial and hate-based ideas, all these are best done in a learning community and with the guidance of a teacher who is supported in addressing their students not primarily as potential threats but as future citizens.

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Recommended Citation

Ben-Porath, S. (2022). Revisiting "citizenship under fire." *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *5*(15).
https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.15.1

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1. This Section Is Adapted From My Article "Learning to Avoid Extremism" Forthcoming in Educational Theory.