Reflections on the Field

Citizenship, Identity, Democracy: Engaging the Political in the Anthropology of Education

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Anchored in insights from my evolving research in Mexico and the United States, this article engages the literature on democratic citizenship education and proposes a potentially unifying research program for the anthropology of education. I urge anthropologists of education to address questions of political order and to bring democracy and citizenship toward the center of our concerns. Just as anthropology has much to contribute to the challenges of citizenship education around the world, a reinvigorated cross-cultural comparison can enrich our working theories of democracy and enliven our contributions to the democratization of education in the United States. [citizenship, identity, democracy, public anthropology, Mexico and the United States]

I begin this article with the observation of an irony that will be central to it. Over the last 25 years, dominant discourses of economic competitiveness, academic basics, and accountability have driven national education policy in the United States and several other liberal democracies. While embracing the rhetoric of democracy, this trend has actually crowded out policies and practices oriented toward civic education for democratic citizenship. In the United States, the movement toward privatization has shrunk the public sphere and occluded practices of democratic education rooted in traditions as diverse as Jeffersonian republicanism, Horace Mann’s common school, Horace Kallen’s cultural pluralism, Deweyan participatory democracy, or Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, civic empowerment. To be sure, countermovements such as the Coalition of Essential Schools or the National School Reform Faculty at the national level, as well as local practices such as service learning and common school uniforms, have kept these democratic educational traditions alive. Still, they swim presently against a very strong current. Now more than ever, our schools overwhelmingly seek to create the economically competent or adaptable worker, not the democratic or intercultural citizen. The practical consequence of such trends has been the eclipse of subjects and teaching methods that impart the skills and dispositions of democratic citizenship, by the subjects and teaching methods suited for imparting standardized academic knowledge. Much of the latter is justified by a discourse in favor of so-called “lifelong learning”—arguably a euphemism to train flexible labor for capital.

Over these same 25 years, meanwhile, there has been an explosion of interest in democratic citizenship and civic education around the world (Stevick and Levinson forthcoming). This appears to be one of the many paradoxes of globalization: As states everywhere generally shrink or background their political-economic functions,
they still bolster their role in schooling democratic citizens (Castles 2004). Now, in most of the so-called "new" or "transitional" democracies, such as Mexico, as well as in the older European democracies undergoing striking demographic transition, scholars and educators have looked to the United States for ideas about democratic education. They have found in the United States abundant models in the philosophical and pedagogical literature, and they have discovered nonprofit organizations such as the Center for Civic Education and Civitas International that specialize in exporting programs and curricula for democratic civic education. Yet such educators in other countries are typically less aware that the trend in U.S. public education has been to eschew a central commitment to educating democratic citizens. They may take for granted that the teaching of democracy is alive and well in U.S. schools. Thus, as countries around the world engage in fresh debates about the meanings of democracy and the role of schools in building it, they appropriate and enliven U.S. ideas that have increasingly fallen into disuse stateside.

Where have U.S.-based anthropologists of education been located in this ironic scenario? Generalization is risky, of course, but I would venture that much of our work over this period has pursued questions of cultural difference, identity, and learning orientation in relation to school performance or failure. Following the dominant liberal script, we have most frequently conceived difference in terms of racial or ethnic membership (Jacob and Jordan 1993). Our research concerns and categories have largely grown out of the popular categories used to mark difference in the United States (Rockwell 2002). Depending on our theory of power and social change, we may focus our work on critiquing and transforming those structural arrangements that privilege some social groups over others, or we may propose more just and effective educational arrangements that recognize and "accommodate" cultural diversity.

No doubt most of us have imagined our work to contribute to strengthening democratic life and reclaiming our democratic ideals (Ladson-Billings 2004), yet this political horizon has remained largely implicit. A 20-year review of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* is very instructive in this regard. In reviewing article titles and abstracts over the 20-year period since 1984, I discovered the following: There is not a single mention of "citizenship"; there is no mention of "democracy" or "democratic" concerns until 1992, after which there are a total of five mentions, but none central to the article's main argument; there is no mention of "identity" until 1991, after which there are some 20 mentions. Clearly, identity has been a growing concern and topic in the anthropology of education, but it has been in reference to social membership and thus largely divorced from questions of democracy or citizenship. Like Parker (2003), I worry that we have allowed our thinking to become trapped within separate categories and separate academic discourses of "multiculturalism" and "citizenship." We must bridge such divides, and reengage the discourse of citizenship with difference, in order to deepen the practice of democratic education in the United States.

I pursue this line of inquiry here through attention to our scholarly practice as anthropologists of education, as well as attention to emerging discussions of democratic citizenship. Anchored in self-critique and insights from my own evolving research in Mexico, I attempt to bring two salient points to the fore. In many ways, these points represent the bread and butter of anthropological practice, applied to the case at hand. First, while anthropology provides an ethnographic methodology and
grounded theories of culture that could infuse the research on democratic citizenship education, this has all too rarely happened. A renovated anthropology of education, engaged with questions of political order and critical theoretical discourses in the discipline, could be extremely illuminating for the challenges of citizenship education around the world. Second, a reinvigorated cross-cultural comparison, specifically on new forms of civic and citizenship education around the world, can enrich our working theories of democracy and enliven our attempts to contribute to the democratization of education in the United States.

Citizenship Education and Democracy in Mexico

Let me tell a story about how I discovered and developed “citizenship” in my own work. About five years ago I completed a study of student culture and identity formation at a Mexican secondary school (Levinson 2001). In that work, I sought to understand how students in the school, amid considerable sociocultural diversity, developed what I came to call, following Ortner (1996), a cultural “game of equality.” Tropes of equality and national identity, rooted in the broader history of postrevolutionary Mexican education and state formation, formed an important part of school life. The school’s creation of diverse class cohorts and structuring of everyday activities also encouraged a sense of equality. Students appropriated the organizational and discursive resources made available to them to create their own cultural forms and their own meanings. As a result, students from otherwise rather different backgrounds and sociocultural circumstances came to see one another as more alike, more “equal,” within the terms of this cultural game. Playing the game in 1991 then had consequences for students’ identities and trajectories over the next several years.

My study of student culture and equality in Mexico was originally framed by social and cultural reproduction theory in education. This literature is very political, to be sure, concerned as it is with how schools help reproduce social inequalities. By the 1990s, an ethnographic stream in the reproduction literature had begun to emphasize the role of peer culture in social and cultural reproduction (Levinson and Holland 1996). What emerged as a common pattern across these ethnographic accounts was the prevalence of subcultural polarization in U.S., European, and Australian secondary schools. It appeared that school structures and practices fomented such polarization. I wanted to study whether and how this occurred at a Mexican secondary school. What I eventually discovered was a school structure and culture that promoted unification, even as it gave rise to new and unintended divisions between secondary students and those who no longer studied (Levinson 1996). Above all, the school promoted a strong common identity on the grounds of national citizenship, and this common identity, appropriated and inflected by students, forestalled the polarization of student peer groups; it also appeared to displace or postpone processes of reproductive differentiation to spaces and times outside or after school life.

Contemporaneous with my extended period of fieldwork (1988–1998) was a burgeoning movement for democracy in Mexico (Preston and Dillon 2004). In fits and starts, Mexican civil society was beginning to throw off the yoke of authoritarian, single-party rule. Elections became fairer and cleaner, and the flow of information became freer. Human rights and transparency in government developed as key discourses of an emerging democratic culture. Opposition parties secured important
victories, and new social movements generated outside the state came to exercise important influence on policy and public opinion. Concurrent with the democratic turn, Mexicans across the political spectrum also grew increasingly concerned about social "disintegration." The combined influence of mass media, transnational migration, economic recession, aggressive consumerism, and new forms of labor exploitation appeared to create severe dislocations in everyday life. Among the results of these dislocations that adult Mexicans most emphasized was the shifting, precarious attitude of many youth. To hear parents and teachers tell it, Mexican youth were now more likely than ever to gratuitously challenge parental authority, engage in violence or crime, and disrespect the traditional symbols of national and community life. Adults talked a lot about a "loss of values" in the current generation, yet they had few ideas about how to effectively address it (Levinson 2003, 2005). Many, of course, looked to the school; more specifically, they sought a solution through resuscitating the grand tradition of civic education (Latapi Sarre 2003).

From the moment of its creation in 1923, the Mexican secondary school, or secundaria, has prominently featured a civics curriculum. Through successive presidential administrations of the 20th century, civic education has varied, but always around certain key themes: learning and valuing the official legal and political instruments of Mexican society, developing a sense of belonging and commitment to the nation, and developing forms of solidarity and cooperation at the local level. However, during the main part of my fieldwork from 1990 to 1991, there was no separate course in "civic education" at most secondary schools. Since 1974, civic themes had been folded into a general curriculum of social studies, which occupied seven hours of the week's 35-hour curriculum. A serious reform of Mexican civic education began just as I was finishing my year of school ethnography. The "basic agreement on educational modernization" of 1992, followed by the constitutional reforms of 1993, led to the return of a distinct course of civics (civismo) and the introduction of a new course called "educational orientation." It also made secondary schooling officially compulsory. Educators hoped and assumed that civic education, along with the new course in orientation, would serve to channel student values in a positive direction.

Then, in 1995, the secretary of education gave an internal team the charge to create an ambitious new program in "civic and ethical formation" (FCE) for all three years of secondary school. The FCE program attempted to respond to those societal concerns about the loss of values through a curriculum of democratic citizenship formation. Meanwhile, prominently placed advocates of the ongoing democratic opening also saw in the schools and the FCE program a chance to build a new political culture from the ground up. For them, values of democratic participation, equity, open debate, and respect were paramount.

By 1999 the new FCE program had been implemented in virtually every Mexican secondary school, public or private (Levinson 2003). Highlighting a dialogic, student-centered pedagogy, the authors of the FCE hoped that it would form the axis of a new, less authoritarian school culture to offset traditionally authoritarian practices (Fierro and Carbajal 2003; Garcia Salord and Vanella 1992). Moreover, the decision to combine the political socialization goals of civic education with the multifaceted aim of "ethical" values formation brought together a set of so-called democratic attitudes and competencies that had not been articulated in quite the same fashion before. Education for democratic citizenship became inextricably linked with the
clarification of values and the "prevention" of undesirable attitudes and activities, such as drug use, prostitution, or illegal gang participation. Importantly, prevention would not be sought through moralizing or punitive measures (e.g., "abstinence only" or "just say no"), but through a process of communication and dialogical reflection.

The development and implementation of the FCE in Mexico is exciting in a number of ways. It represents a fresh attempt to actualize the practice of democracy in Mexican schools, to create a school life more consonant with emerging democratic movements and practices in the broader society. Among policymakers, administrators, teachers, and even students there appears to be a vigorous, and salutary, debate about the meanings of democracy and about the most important elements of "values" and citizenship education for democracy (Latapi Sarré 2003). This debate began in earnest with the Mexican student movement of the 1960s, which openly questioned the democratic façade of an authoritarian state. It has since taken a great variety of forms, ranging from electoral reform and anticorruption legislation at the national level to subtle changes in community affiliation and gender relations at more local levels (e.g., Gutmann 2002). Part of this debate involves questioning the homogenizing myth of national identity in favor of a more pluralist conception of citizenship (Villoro 2001). In virtually every case, the debate about cultivating democracy in Mexico has invoked the importance of education.

My interest in education for democracy grew throughout the 1990s, as I was finishing my extended dissertation study and casting about for new topics of research. Yet I have continually asked myself how and why I could have missed the importance of citizenship, values formation, and democracy in my earlier fieldwork. Certainly, I had numerous discussions with friends and colleagues—many of them schoolteachers—about politics in Mexico. I was privy to the alternating hope and cynicism that has characterized much of everyday Mexican discourse about democracy for the last 20 years. I also was a close witness to a dissident movement within the national teachers' union that claimed democracy as its mantle (2001:49-51). Yet neither the word *democracy* nor the word *citizenship* appears in my book's index.

I have since come to believe that a major factor contributing to this temporary myopia was the absence of a serious discourse on citizenship and democracy in the anthropology of education. Neither social and cultural reproduction theory nor the prevailing variants of "cultural difference" theory encourage us to link our research with the concerns of democracy and citizenship education. Although our existing theoretical frames may carry an implicit democratic charge, seeking justice and inclusiveness, they fail to orient us explicitly toward questions and debates of political order. In many ways, this inattention to politics simply mirrors a deeper American educational myopia. The themes of citizenship education for democracy—political participation, deliberation, civic engagement, and so on—are relatively invisible in our typical school curriculum, not to mention the surrounding civic culture. It is no wonder, then, that anthropology hasn't sniffed them out very well. Tellingly, much of my own inspiration came from outside the discipline—a perennially strong program in social studies education for democracy at Indiana University (e.g., Patrick et al. 2003). It was also the special interest of two of my graduate students in the "new" democratic civic education in Estonia and Indonesia, respectively (Doyle Stevick and Wendy Gaylord), that prodded me to look again in Mexico.
When I finally "discovered" the broader Mexican debate about democratic citizenship in the late 1990s, and when I learned of recent developments in civic education, I realized for perhaps the first time that what had taken center stage in my ethnographic writing were in fact practices of citizenship education and values formation. Even without a stand-alone civics curriculum, the secundaria I studied was actively engaged in producing moral subjects oriented toward the collective good. The wearing of common uniforms, the structuring of cohorts, teachers' exhortations to solidarity, the Monday morning rituals of national identification—all of these were elements of an integral values education for citizenship (Levinson 2002). Such education, of course, was only nominally democratic in the liberal sense, yet it also embodied elements of equality and solidarity that might well temper the prevailing individualism of an emerging liberal democracy. Moreover, there was, of course, an active values education occurring in spaces outside the school. In my writing, I describe this varied education of the home, the church, the workplace, and the "street" in a language of identity formation, but it was also, I now see, about the varieties of citizenship. And the sense of citizenship one learned in the school did not always mesh smoothly with the citizenship taught and caught elsewhere. One female student, for instance, was an avid consumer of pop psychology advice in magazines and daytime television programs. Embracing the individualistic ethic of self-improvement communicated there, she chafed against the school's emphasis on group solidarity.

In my most recent research, I have explored one small corner of the educational bureaucracy in Mexico. I have undertaken a modest ethnographic study of how the FCE program came into being and how it is now faring in the context of other, competing proposals for citizenship education (Levinson 2005). Yet my broader agenda eventually includes a return to the students—an intensive, multisited ethnographic study of civic teaching and learning in early Mexican adolescence. Through both longitudinal and "latitudinal" methods, I will attempt to assess the relative impact of school-based citizenship education on students' broader learning of civic identities. Although this work is far from complete, I can see that theories of citizenship and discourses of democracy have seriously framed it.

Meanwhile, I also have taken my concerns about citizenship and democracy to the local level in central Indiana. My study of "educational ecologies" for the social integration of newcomer immigrants draws heavily on the same literature. One of the great dramas playing out in numerous U.S. locales is the clash of cultural difference produced through new kinds of transnational migration. Yet it is not enough to theorize such conflict in terms of racial or cultural difference. What is at stake is the very definition of democratic citizenship and the way that political participation gets constructed locally. Race figures into this construction, of course. Dominant discourses of assimilation and intégration presuppose certain "desirable" social characteristics, the prerequisites of political participation, which may or may not be deemed educable. But local institutions, including schools, play a preponderant role in projecting the discourses that define both the limits and the necessary qualities of political participation and social belonging.

The Unifying Potential of Scholarship on Citizenship, Identity, and Democracy

As a U.S. citizen writing about Mexican education, and as a proponent of comparative case study, I have often been drawn willy-nilly into discussions about the
meaning of my Mexican findings for other national traditions of schooling. Although I have never written about implications from the Mexican case for the practice of schooling in liberal democracy, I have been asked to do so in numerous presentations of my work. At conferences and lectures, and perhaps especially in my own university classes, colleagues and students have wondered whether some of the schooling practices in Mexico could be advantageously adopted into U.S. schools. (We, too, are apparently lacking in values education.) The salutary sense of solidarity and the absence of invidious distinction, in particular, strike most as worthy of import. On the other hand, perhaps just as many cringe at what they see as a prescription for conformity. They worry about what would happen to our vaunted individualism, our freedom to pursue self-expression. According to such liberal understandings, any kind of prescribed collectivism would be profoundly antidemocratic.

These kinds of discussions serve to highlight what has become a common frame of reference for education at the dawn of the 21st century: Around the world, schools have become key sites for the negotiation of local meanings with global institutional forms (Anderson-Levitt 2003). More to the point, school-based programs in democratic civic and citizenship education have become one of the primary sites for the creation of new political dispositions and identities and for the consolidation of meanings about "democracy." This alone should qualify such programs as eminently worthy of anthropological attention. Yet equally important has been the powerful rise of the electronic media and autonomous youth cultures as contexts for identity formation (Nespor 1997). Alongside family, church, and other traditional sources of moral authority, schools and media cultures provide crucial resources for the elaboration (or abrogation) of civic identity.

As it happens, questions of identity formation have continued moving to the theoretical heart of contemporary cultural anthropology, as has a burgeoning anthropology of politics and the "public" (Holland et al. in press; Lipman this issue). For over a decade now, anthropologists and sociologists alike have undertaken a considered meditation on the imperatives of public scholarship. This meditation has coupled a disciplinary reflection on the means of influencing policy with a theoretical-methodological reflection on how to study politics, policy, and public-making in complex societies. In dialogue with the field of political and legal anthropology, an exciting new anthropology of nationalism, globalization, and democracy has arguably led the way in these developments (e.g., Appadurai 2002; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Lomnitz 2001; Paley 2002). Such work, broadly speaking, seeks to elucidate the cultural forms that constitute the nation-state, as well as the cultural forms that articulate new modes of political action and participation.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2004:120), quoting our very own George Spindler (1987), suggests that "from an anthropological perspective, all education is citizenship education." What I propose here, then, is a strong reminder and a potentially unifying research program for the anthropology of education that engages with the heart of the discipline. I suggest that the anthropological study of citizenship importantly links processes of identity formation to the political-economic forces that sponsor and construct educational programs for creating "democratic" publics. Of the few examples of work in educational anthropology that have sought to articulate the relation between education, citizenship, and identity, recent ones that stand out are Aurolyn Luykx's (1999) study of Indigenous teacher education in Bolivia and Kathleen Hall's
original research on Sikh immigrant youth in Britain. While contributing a great deal to formulations of citizenship and identity, neither work frames the question of citizenship strongly in terms of democracy.

Citizenship, identity, and democracy are key concepts, indexing tremendously vital debates and change processes in the world today. As a shorthand, I offer the following working definitions: Citizenship is about the rules and meanings of political and cultural membership, and the associated modes of participation implied by such membership; identity is about the varying senses of social belonging and commitment that form in each individual; and democracy is about the continual construction of a political order that sponsors reasoned deliberation, promotes civic participation in decision making, justly distributes political-economic power, and strives for cultural inclusiveness. The study of citizenship education for democracy is therefore the study of efforts to educate the members of a social group to imagine their social belonging and exercise their participation as democratic citizens.

Now, an anthropology of citizenship education for democracy may well have as one of its goals the development of a cultural critique, theorizing the way that "controlling processes" (Nader 1995) limit and blunt the full possibilities for democratic participation. Yet an anthropology of citizenship education for democracy may also contribute knowledge to alternative democratic projects, to educational efforts aimed at creating plural "counterpublics" for a democratic renaissance (Benhabib 1996). As democratic theorist Jeffrey Isaac, following Hannah Arendt, puts it, we can and should help develop such democratic "oases in the desert" (Isaac 1998). Much of the action and applied work in contemporary educational anthropology could easily be framed in such terms. My own recent work, described above, has elements of both of these kinds of knowledge production. My study of civic education for democracy in Mexico aims to illuminate the structural and ideological obstacles to effective democratic civic learning in Mexican schools, even as it brings the Mexican case into a critique of practices elsewhere. Meanwhile, my study of local newcomer integration has an important applied, dialogical component, with professional development activities, advocacy work, and website publication oriented to local democratic actors.

Until now, the study of civics and citizenship education has been dominated by researchers in the fields of political science, comparative education, and social studies education (e.g., Niemi and Junn 1998; Torney-Purta et al. 2001). Such researchers tend to use survey methods and to take for granted the limited hegemonic meanings of liberal (representative) democracy. With its diverse methodological toolkit, anthropology has a great deal to contribute to this body of work. Anthropology has always had as its strength the elucidation of cultural frameworks of meaning, of local identities; in recent years, as we have learned to cross sites and theorize both social scale and connectivity, we have also become more adept at understanding the interplay between such local identities and broader social, cultural, and political-economic structures and processes (e.g., Lamphere 1992; Marcus 1998). We understand how concepts of "the educated person" are structured at the local level and enter into a dynamic interplay with other concepts of the educated person that circulate at the level of the state and the world system (Levinson and Holland 1996). Describing this with ethnographic detail and theorizing its political consequences can make a significant contribution. As a matter of policy concern, anthropologists also can speak to questions of citizenship education. Building on decades of work regarding the social
life of schools and the problematic of cultural difference, anthropologists of education can reframe and extend their findings as a contribution to the search for democratic conviviality in schools.

For most readers who, like me, remain activists at heart for more socially just schooling, the worldwide movement for democratic citizenship education can have important comparative lessons. Recent scholarship has highlighted, once again, just how much the meanings of democratic citizenship, and the purposes of public schooling for achieving that citizenship, have varied and shifted historically in the United States. For over 200 years, we have engaged in a debate about how schooling can contribute to the "common good" (Cuban and Shipps 2000; Tyack 2001). The stakes in this debate are now higher than ever, for the common good is apparently out of style. We have moved further away from citizenship, Walter Parker (2003) would say, into idiocy—that is, in the original Greek, separation and self-centeredness, rather than public-mindedness. One way we can enter the conversation is to bring the irony with which I opened this article full circle: We can help publicize the efforts and debates, the lessons learned, in other countries, to revitalize our own efforts at citizenship education for democracy. Having appropriated our now atrophied democracy, other countries may now project it back to us with freshness and vigor. But we have to be willing to take up the message.

Finally, we should also garner the lessons even closer at hand, in the cultural perspectives and identities of recent migrants to the United States. This is a different kind of transnational presence, made vivid not through borrowed educational programs but through the assertion of alternative educational thought. Made to feel foreign and in need of so-called democratic "discipline" (Murillo 2002), such transnational migrant communities produce moral discourses that could actually contribute a great deal to our own evolving democratic education, if we choose to listen closely. From Cambodian Buddhists in California (Ong 2003) to Mexican mothers in North Carolina (Villenas 2002), what these communities articulate is a different sense of "democratic education" for the common good. Such alternative moral discourses, if invited forthrightly into the public spheres of schooling, could help to remold the "American mainstream" along more broadly democratic lines.

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