READING 9.2

Teaching Against Idiocy

Walter C. Parker

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Contemplating the root of the word "idiocy" leads Mr. Parker to explore the challenge that democratic societies face of developing public-minded citizens. The schools, he argues, are the most likely institutions to succeed in that task.

Idiocy IS the scourge of our time and place. Idiocy was a problem for the ancient Greeks, too, for they coined the term. "Idiocy" in its original sense is not what it means to us today—stupid or mentally deficient. The recent meaning is deservedly and entirely out of usage by educators, but the original meaning needs to be revived as a conceptual tool for clarifying a pivotal social problem and for understanding the central goal of education.

Idiocy shares with idiom and idiosyncratic the root idios, which means private, separate, self-centered—selfish. "Idiotic" was in the Greek context a term of reproach. When a person's behavior became idiotic—concerned myopically with private things and unmindful of common things—then the person was believed to be like a rudderless ship, without consequence save for the danger it posed to others. This meaning of idiocy achieves its force when contrasted with polit¯es (citizen) or public. Here we have a powerful opposition: the private individual versus the public citizen.

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Schools in societies that are trying in various ways to be democracies, such as the United States, Mexico, and Canada, are obliged to develop public citizens. I argue here that schools are well positioned for the task, and I suggest how they can improve their efforts and achieve greater success.

DODGING PUBERTY

An idiot is one whose self-centeredness undermines his or her citizen identity, causing it to wither or never to take root in the first place. Private gain is the goal, and the community had better not get in the way. An idiot is suicidal in a certain way, definitely self-defeating, for the idiot does not know that privacy and individual autonomy are entirely dependent on the community. As Aristotle wrote, "Individuals are so many parts all equally depending on the whole which alone can bring self-sufficiency."[1] Idiots do not take part in public life; they do not have a public life. In this sense, idiots are immature in the most fundamental way. Their lives are out of balance, disoriented, untethered, and unrealized. Tragically, idiots have not yet met the challenge of "puberty," which is the transition to public life.

The former mayor of Missoula, Montana, Daniel Kemmis, writes of the idiocy/citizenship opposition, though he uses a different term, in his delightful meditation on democratic politics, The Good City and the Good Life:

> People who customarily refer to themselves as taxpayers are not even remotely related to democratic citizens. Yet this is precisely the word that now regularly holds the

> place which in a true democracy would be occupied by "citizens." Taxpayers bear a dual relationship to government, neither half of which has anything at all to do with democracy. Taxpayers pay tribute to the government, and they receive services from it. So does every subject of a totalitarian regime. What taxpayers do not do, and what people who call themselves taxpayers have long since stopped even imagining themselves doing, is governing. In a democracy, by the very meaning of the word, the people govern.[2]

Alexis de Tocqueville, writing 150 years before Mayor Kemmis, also described idiocy. All democratic peoples face a "dangerous passage" in their history, he wrote, when they "are carried away and lose all self-restraint at the sight of the new possessions they are about to obtain."[3] De Tocqueville's principal concern was that getting "carried away" causes citizens to lose the very freedom they are wanting so much to enjoy. "These people think they are following the principle of self-interest," he continues, "but the idea they entertain of that principle is a very crude one; and the more they look after what they call their own business, they neglect their chief business, which is to remain their own masters."

Just how do people remain their own masters? By maintaining the kind of community that secures their liberty. De Tocqueville's singular contribution to our understanding of idiocy and citizenship is the notion that idiots are idiotic precisely because they are indifferent to the conditions and contexts of their own freedom. They fail to grasp the interdependence of liberty and community, privacy and puberty.

Similarly, Jane Addams argued in 1909 that, if a woman was planning to "keep on with her old business of caring for her house and rearing her children," then it was necessary that she expand her consciousness to include "public affairs lying quite outside her immediate household." The individualistic consciousness was "no longer effective":

> Women who live in the country sweep their own dooryards and may either feed the refuse of the table to a flock of chickens or allow it innocently to decay in the open air and sunshine. In a crowded city quarter, however, if the street is not cleaned by the city authorities, no amount of private sweeping will keep the tenement free from grime; if the garbage is not properly collected and destroyed a tenement house mother may see her children sicken and die of diseases from which she alone is powerless to shield them, although her tenderness and devotion are unbounded.[4]

Addams concluded that for women to tend only to their "own" households was "idiotic," for to do only that would prevent women, ironically, from doing just that at all. One cannot maintain the familial nest without maintaining the public, shared space in which the familial nest is itself nested. "As society grows more complicated," she continued, "it is necessary that woman shall extend her sense of responsibility to many things outside of her own home if she would continue to preserve the home in its entirety."

Leaving aside individuals, families can be idiotic, too. The paradigm case is the Mafia—a family that looks inward intensely and solely. A thick moral code glues the insiders together, but in dealing with outsiders who are beyond the galaxy of one's obligations and duties, anything goes. There is no organized cooperation across families to tackle shared problems (health, education, welfare), no shared games, not even communication save the occasional "treaty." There are no bridging associations. Edward Banfield called this amoral familism and articulated its ethos as "maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise."[5]

Amoral familism is certainly not restricted to the Mafia. Social scientists who examine popular culture find no shortage of it today. Perhaps the best contemporary example in the U.S., because it is both so mundane and so pervasive, is the SUV craze. Here, the suburban family provides for its own safety and self-esteem during such mobile tasks as commuting to work and running household errands, but it does so at others' expense. When criticized for putting other drivers and passengers at risk, for widening the ozone hole, and for squandering nonrenewable resources, SUV drivers often justify their behavior by speaking of their "rights" or the advantage of "sitting up higher than others." But they focus especially on "family safety."[6] It is my right to do whatever I choose, goes the argument, with the added and supposedly selfless rationalization of protecting "my" family from dangers real and imagined. To draw the line of obligation so close to the nuclear family is idiotic because it undermines, as Addams and De Tocqueville argued, that family's own safety along with everyone else's.

We could continue this survey of idiocy from its individual and familial forms to its large-scale enactments in ethnocentrism, racism, or the nationalistic variety, wherein a nation secures its own needs and wants in such a way that the world environment—every human's nest—is fouled, whether by conquest or by dumping poisons into the air and water. But let me instead conclude this section with a puzzle: How did idiocy grow from an exception in the Greek polis to a commonplace in contemporary, economically developed societies? Numerous social scientists have asked just this question. Karl Marx saw idiocy ("alienation," he called it) as the inevitable by-product of capitalism, wherein accumulating profit becomes an end in itself and nearly everything—from labor to love—is commodified toward that end. Robert Bellah and his colleagues located

idiocy in a deeply pervasive culture of rugged individualism. John Kenneth Galbraith focused on the mass affluence of contemporary North American society, in which, for example, beef cattle are consumed at such a rate as to flood the environment with their waste, while farmland is misdirected to their feed. As Galbraith wrote, "Few people at the beginning of the nineteenth century needed an adman to tell them what they wanted."[7]

SCHOOLS AND IDIOCY

Capitalism, individualism, and affluence are a powerful brew. But what about the education sector of society? Do schools marshal their human and material resources to produce idiots or citizens? Does the school curriculum cultivate private vices or public virtues? Can schools tame the rugged individualism and amoral familism that undermine puberty and foul the common nest?

Actually, schools already educate for citizenship to some extent, and therein lies our hope. By identifying how schools accomplish at least some of this work now, educators can direct and fine-tune the effort. The wheel doesn't need to be reinvented; it is at hand and only needs to be rolled more intentionally, explicitly, and directly toward citizenship. There are three assumptions that propel this work and three keys to its success.

The first assumption is that democracy (rule by the people) is morally superior to autocracy (rule by one person), theocracy (rule by clerics), aristocracy (rule by a permanent upper class), plutocracy (rule by the rich), and the other alternatives, mainly because it better secures liberty, justice, and equality than the others do. Among actually attainable ways of living together and making decisions about common problems and projects, democracy (that is, a republic, a constitutional democracy) is, as Winston Churchill said, the worst form of government except for all the others.[8] Democracy is better than the alternatives because it aspires to and, to varying degrees, is held accountable for securing civil liberties, equality before the law, limited government, competitive elections, and solidarity around a common project (a civic unum) that exists alongside individual and cultural manyness (pluribus).

That democracies fall short of achieving these aspirations is obvious, and it is the chief impetus of social movements that seek to close the gap between the actual and the ideal. Thus Martin Luther King, Jr., demanded in his 1963 March on Washington address not an alternative to democracy but its fulfillment:

> We have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. . . . We have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.[9]

The purpose of the civil rights movement was not to alter the American Dream but to realize it. When a democracy excludes its own members for whatever reason (slavery, patriarchy, Jim Crow, etc.), it is "actively and purposefully false to its own vaunted principles," wrote Judith Shklar.[10] Here is democracy's built-in progressive impulse: to live up to itself.

The second assumption required if schools are to educate for citizenship is that there can be no democracy without democrats. Democratic ways of living together, with the people's differences intact and recognized, are not given by nature; they are created. And much of the creative work must be undertaken by engaged citizens who share some understanding of what it is they are trying to build together. Often, it is the unjustly treated members of a community who are democracy's vanguard, pushing it toward its principles. "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed," King wrote in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."[11] The Framers of the U.S. Constitution may have been the birth parents of democracy, American style, but those who were excluded, then and now, became the adoptive, nurturing parents.

The third assumption is that engaged citizens do not materialize out of thin air. They do not naturally grasp such knotty principles as tolerance, impartial justice, the separation of church and state, the need for limits on majority power, or the difference between liberty and license. They are not born already capable of deliberating about public policy issues with other citizens whose beliefs and cultures they may abhor. These things are not, as the historical record makes all too clear, hard-wired into our genes. (Just ask any school principal!) Rather, they are social, moral, and intellectual achievements, and they are hard won. This third assumption makes clear the enormous importance of educating children for democracy.

On the foundation of these three assumptions, taken together, educators are justified in shaping curriculum and instruction toward the development of democratic citizens. In poll after poll, the American public makes clear its expectation that schools do precisely this.[12]

SCHOOLS ARE PUBLIC PLACES

As it turns out, schools are ideal sites for democratic citizenship education. The main reason is that a school is not a private place, like our homes, but a public, civic place

with a congregation of diverse students. Some schools are more diverse than others, of course, but all schools are diverse to some meaningful extent. Former kindergarten teacher Vivian Gussin Paley put it plainly: "The children I teach are just emerging from life's deep wells of private perspective: babyhood and family. Then, along comes school. It is the first real exposure to the public arena."[13] Boys and girls are both there. Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists are there together. There are African Americans, European Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and many more. Immigrants from the world over are there in school.

This buzzing variety does not exist at home, or in churches, temples, or mosques either. It exists in public places where diverse people are thrown together, places where people who come from numerous private worlds and social positions congregate on common ground. These are places where multiple social perspectives and personal values are brought into face-to-face contact around matters that "are relevant to the problems of living together," as John Dewey put it.[14] Such matters are mutual, collective concerns, not mine or yours, but ours.

Compared to home life, schools are like village squares, cities, crossroads, meeting places, community centers, marketplaces. When aimed at democratic ends and supported by the proper democratic conditions, the interaction in schools can help children enter the social consciousness of puberty and develop the habits of thinking and caring necessary for public life. They can learn the tolerance, the respect, the sense of justice, and the knack for forging public policy with others whether one likes them or not. If the right social and psychological conditions are present and are mobilized, students might even give birth to critical consciousness. This is the kind of thinking that enables them to cut through conventional wisdom and see a better way.

This, then, is the great democratic potential of the public places we call schools. As Dewey observed, "The notion that the essentials of elementary education are the three R's mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for realization of democratic ideals."[15] Used well, schools can nurture these "essentials," which are the very qualities needed for the hard work of living together freely but cooperatively and with justice, equality, and dignity. Schools can do this because of the collective problems and the diversity contained within them. Problems and diversity are the essential assets for cultivating democratic citizens.

THREE KEYS

But how actually to accomplish this? Three actions are key.

First, increase the variety and frequency of interaction among students who are culturally, linguistically, and racially different from one another. Classrooms sometimes do this naturally. But if the school itself is homogeneous or if the school is diverse but curriculum tracks keep groups of students apart, then this first key will be all the more difficult to turn. It is not helping that resegregation has intensified in recent years, despite an increasingly diverse society. White students today are the most segregated from all other races in their schools.[16] (On this criterion, they may be at the greatest risk of idiocy.) Still, race is not the only source of diversity among students. School leaders must capitalize on whatever diversity is present among students—be it race, religion, language, gender, or social class—and increase the variety and frequency of opportunities for interaction.

Second, orchestrate these contacts so as to foster competent public talk—deliberation about common problems. In schools, this is talk about two kinds of problems: social and academic. Social problems arise inevitably from the friction of interaction itself (Dewey's "problems of living together"). Academic problems are at the core of each subject area.

Third, clarify the distinction between deliberation and blather and between open (i.e., inclusive) and closed (i.e., exclusive) deliberation. In other words, expect, teach, and model competent, inclusive deliberation.

I lay out the pedagogical details of teaching deliberation in elementary and secondary schools in Teaching Democracy (Teachers College Press, 2003). In it, I feature numerous successful programs already under way. Here are some highlights.

Deliberation exploits the assets afforded by schools: problems and a diverse student body. Deliberation is discussion aimed at making a decision across these differences about a problem that the participants face in common. The main action during a deliberation is weighing alternatives with others in order to decide on the best course of action. In schools, deliberation is not only a means of instruction (teaching with deliberation) but also a curricular goal (teaching for deliberation), because it generates a particular kind of social good: a democratic community, a public culture. The norms of this culture include, first, engagement in cooperative problem solving. This is in contrast to avoiding engagement either by being idiotically consumed by private affairs or by electing others to do the deliberation and then relapsing into idiocy for the four years between elections. Other norms include listening as well as talking, perspective taking, arguing with evidence, sharing resources, and forging a decision together rather than merely advocating positions taken before the deliberation begins.

Deliberation is ideally done with persons who are more or less different from one another; for pedagogical purposes, therefore, deliberative groups—schools and classrooms—should be as diverse as possible. Teachers and

administrators can expand the opportunities for interaction by increasing the number and kind of mixed student groups. These groups should be temporary, because separating students permanently, for whatever reason, undermines both individual and civic health. What the participants have in common in these mixed groups is not culture, race, or opinion but the problems they face together and must work out together in ways that strike everyone as fair.[17]

THE SOCIAL CURRICULUM

Probably the best-known example of young children deliberating their shared social problems comes from the kindergarten classroom of Vivian Gussin Paley. In a number of books, Paley has captured the look and feel of actual classroom-based deliberation, and she shows how entirely possible it is to do such work in everyday classroom settings, even with the youngest children. In *You Can't Say You Can't Play,* she tells how she facilitated a lengthy deliberation about whether to establish the classroom rule of the book's title. She engages the kindergartners in an ongoing discussion about the desirability and practicability of having such a rule. She tells them, "I just can't get the question out of my mind. Is it fair for children in school to keep another child out of play? After all, this classroom belongs to all of us. It is not a private place, like our homes."[18] The children find this a compelling question, and they have lots to say. Paley brings them to the discussion circle again and again to weigh the alternatives. "Will the rule work? Is it fair?" she asks. Memories and opinions flow. "If you cry, people should let you in," Ben says. "But then what's the whole point of playing?" Lisa complains.

Paley sometimes interviews older children to ascertain their views and brings them back to her kindergartners. Trading classes with a second-grade teacher, Paley tells those children: "I've come to ask your opinions about a new rule we're considering in the kindergarten. . . . We call it, 'You can't say you can't play.' " These older children know the issue well. Vivid accounts of rejection are shared. Some children believe the rule is fair but just won't work: "It would be impossible to have any fun," offers one boy. In a fourth-grade class, students conclude that it is "too late" to give them such a rule. "If you want a rule like that to work, start at a very early age," declares one 9-year-old.[19]

Paley takes these views back to the discussion circle in her own classroom. Her children are enthralled as she shares the older children's views. The deliberation is enlarged; the alternatives become more complex. In the Socratic spirit, she gently encourages them to support their views with reasons, to listen carefully, and to respond to the reasoning of other children, both classmates and older children.

High school deliberative projects exist, too. Perhaps the most widely documented are the Just Community schools conducted by Lawrence Kohlberg and his associates.[20] In these projects, democratic governance becomes a way of life in high schools. These projects aim to transform the school culture—its hidden or implicit curriculum—and in this way to systematically cultivate democratic citizenship. Even if the values of justice, liberty, and equality are well explored in the academic curriculum, the students are quick to perceive whether the school itself runs on a different set of values. They will learn the latter as the real rules of the game.

Students in Just Community schools participate in the basic governance of the school. They deliberate on everything from attendance policy to the consequences for stealing and cheating. Today, students might consider whether, as a move against resegregation, cafeteria seating should be assigned randomly.

The Just Community high schools and the kindergarten deliberations of Vivian Paley together suggest five conditions of ideal deliberation.

- Students are engaged in integrated decision-making discussions that involve genuine value conflicts that arise in the course of relating to one another at school. These value conflicts may concern play and name-calling in an elementary school, cliques and taunting in a middle school, and cheating, attendance, and segregation in a high school.
- The discussion group is diverse enough that students have the benefit of exposure to reasoning and social perspectives different from their own.
- The discussion group is free of domination—gross or subtle—by participants who were born into privileged social positions or by those who mature physically before others.
- The discussion leader is skilled at comprehending and presenting reasoning and perspectives that are missing, countering conventional ideas with critical thinking, and advocating positions that are inarticulate or being drummed out of consideration.
- Discussions are dialogic. Discussants engage in conversation about their viewpoints, claims, and arguments, not in alternating monologues.

THE ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

Citizens need disciplinary knowledge just as much as they need deliberative experience and skill. The suggestion to engage students in dialogues on the shared problems of school life is not an argument for "process" without "content." It is not an argument for lessening emphasis on subject-matter

learning. To the contrary, making decisions without knowledge—whether immediate knowledge of the alternatives under consideration or background knowledge—is no cause for celebration. Action without understanding is not wise action except by accident. The Klan acted; the Nazis acted; bullies act every day.

Consequently, a rigorous liberal arts curriculum that deals in powerful ideas, important issues, and core values is essential alongside deliberations of controversial public issues. Moreover, if deliberation is left to the school's social curriculum only—that is, to the nonacademic areas of student relations and school governance—then students are likely to develop the misconception that the academic disciplines are settled and devoid of controversy. Nothing could be further from the truth. The disciplines are loaded with arguments and debates, and expertise in a discipline is measured by one's involvement in these discussions. A good teacher, on this view, is able to engage students, in developmentally appropriate ways, in the core problems of the subject matter.

Historians, for example, argue about everything they study: about why Rome fell, why slavery lasted so long in the U.S., and what forces contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. What historians do is develop theses—warranted assertions—about such matters. They defend their claims with their interpretations of the evidentiary record. Political scientists likewise don't know with certainty why in the past few years the U.S. has abandoned the UN Charter and embarked on rugged unilateralism, nor do they "know" a host of other things: whether nation states will survive their contest with globalization or why the current cohort of 18- to 25-year-olds has proven so unengaged in politics.

Engaging students in deliberations of academic controversies is arguably the most rigorous approach to disciplinary education available. Its advantage over drill-and-cover curricula, whether of the middle-track pedestrian variety or the Advanced Placement version, is that it involves students in both the substantive (facts and theories) and syntactical (methods of inquiry) dimensions of the disciplines.[21] At the same time, such engagement prepares them for the reasoned argumentation of democratic living.

Fortunately, some resources are readily available that help teachers and curriculum leaders decide which issues are appropriate for study and then lay out several alternatives for students to consider. Two of the best low-cost resources for the high school social studies classroom, especially history and government courses, are published by the National Issues Forum and by Choices for the 21st Century.[22] Each organization produces a series of booklets containing background information on a pressing problem (contemporary or historical) and three to four policy alternatives. Both engage students in the kind of deliberation that develops their understanding of one another, of the array of alternatives, of the problem itself, and of its historical context.[23]

The authors of these materials have developed the policy alternatives. Consequently, students are given (and don't have to generate) grist for the analytic mill. Students can evaluate the authors' diagnosis of the problem and judge their representation of stakeholders on the issue. Then they can deliberate about the options presented. The provision of alternatives by the authors scaffolds the task in a helpful way, modeling for students what an array of alternatives looks like and allowing them to work at understanding these and at listening to one another. After such experience, students are ready to have the scaffold removed and to investigate an issue of their own choosing and create their own briefing booklet.

THE THREE R'S?

I would like to see a national campaign against idiocy, and I believe schools are ideal sites for it. Put differently, schools are fitting places to lead young people through puberty and into citizenship. Schools are the sites of choice because they have, to some extent, the two most important resources for this work: diversity and problems.

I realize that this view is apt to be too optimistic for some readers. After all, schools are products of society and are embedded in it. They are not autonomous places where massive social forces can be stopped with a lesson plan. Still, schools are not insignificant sources of social progress. At some level, everyone seems to believe this. It is the reason that curriculum debates are often the most impassioned to be found anywhere in society. My view is that the three R's—mechanically treated and, now, tested with Puritanical fervor—are not the only essentials needed for the realization of democratic ideals. A proper curriculum for democracy requires both the study and the practice of democracy.

ENDNOTES

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13. Vivian Gussin Paley, You Can’t Say You Can’t Play (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 21.
14. John Dewey, Democracy and Education, in Jo Ann Boydston, ed., The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924, vol. 9 (1916; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 200.
15. Ibid.
16. Gary Orfield, “Schools More Separate: Consequences of a Decade of Resegregation,” Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2001, available on the website of the Harvard Civil Rights Project. For access, simply Google the title. Orfield found, “Whites on average attend schools where less than 20% of the students are from all of the other racial and ethnic groups combined. On average, Blacks and Latinos attend schools with 53% to 55% students of their own group. Latinos attend schools with far higher average Black populations than Whites do, and Blacks attend schools with much higher average Latino enrollments. American Indian students attend schools in which about a third (31%) of the students are from Indian backgrounds.”
17. See Thomas F. Pettigrew, “Intergroup Contact: Theory, Research, and New Perspectives,” in James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, eds., Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 770–81; see also Elliot Aronson et al., The Jigsaw Classroom (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1978).
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