

**Americanization, Immigration, and Civic Education:  
The Education of the “Ignorant and Free”**

by Dr. Dan Prinzing, Assistant Professor and Director  
Office of College School Partnerships and Field Experiences  
Boise State University, 1910 University Drive, Boise, Idaho 83725  
Tel: 208-426-1991 – FAX: 208-426-4408  
danielprinzing@boisestate.edu  
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Schools will provide instruction and activities necessary for students to acquire the skills to enable them to be responsible citizens in their homes, schools, communities, state and nation. (Section 33-1612, Idaho Code)

Citizenship education was once argued by educational reformers as necessary in assisting immigrants on the “way to citizenship in the Republic (to) offset the feudal heritage brought from Europe” (Beard, 1944, p. 218). Public schools were viewed as the place where most Americans would learn the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship – with education viewed by Horace Mann, the father of American public school education, as a natural right of every child. To that end, the First Amendment Center claims that “The future of the American republic depends upon instilling in young citizens an abiding commitment to the democratic first principles that sustain our experiment in liberty” (Haynes, 2003, p. 19). Yet, citizenship education / civic education, even prior to federal and state mandates to increase student performance in reading and math, has often been relegated to a mere semester course on government – “compared to as many as three courses in democracy, civics, and government that were common until the 1960s” (Carnegie/CIRCLE, 2003, p. 5). Consequently, the future of the American republic lies in the hands of both native-born and immigrant students who may well prove proficient in reading and math, but fail to actively engage in what Justice

Louis Brandeis called the “most important office” in the land – citizenship. Aptly, one can assert that the knowledge and skills articulated in the *National Standards for Civics and Government* for student learning – and living - are the republic’s safeguards to what Thomas Jefferson cautioned in 1816, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

### **Americanization**

In the early 1900s, “Americanization” - both as a term and as an ideological expectation - described an immigrant’s acculturation into the language, ideals, traditions, and ways of life in the United States. Reacting to the mass emigration from Eastern and Southern Europe between 1880 and the beginning of World War I, immigrant-fearing nativists, along with social workers crusading for housing reform and leaders in business and industry seeking profit margins on the backs of a disciplined labor force, collectively campaigned for financial and educational support of Americanization. “The common school was conceived as a place where students, including an enormous and ever-growing immigrant community, could learn about the roots of American democratic and republican ideals,” (EdSource, 2002, p. 6).

As the United States entered World War I, in the sweeping spirit of nationalism, the Federal Bureau of Education and Federal Bureau of Naturalization assisted private Americanization groups hosting public displays of patriotism - “Americanization Day” rallies, July Fourth celebrations, patriotic-themed classes, and naturalization ceremonies. By 1916, instruction in Americanization was augmented by a “Course on Citizenship” published by the Bureau of Naturalization. Linked to the war effort, states passed

legislation providing for the education and Americanization of the foreign-born. By 1921, most states with a measurable foreign-born population provided facilities for immigrant education in the English language and American history. Institutionalized in both government and civil society, and supported by American presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson (Fonte, 2001), the campaign was to make Americans out of immigrants.

However, the financial crisis of the late 1920s and 1930s turned Congressional attention and funding away from Americanization to border control, deportation laws, and the heightened regulation of immigration. Americanization classes continued to exist only at the community level to prepare immigrants for the “citizenship exam” (Schneider, 2003).

Presented at the Institut für Migrationsforschung und Interkulturelle Studien 2003 workshop on “Paths of Integration,” Dorothee Schneider notes in her paper that,

Work and community were at the center of immigrant’s lives and their perception of America. Politics and one’s life as a political citizen, always at the center of the earlier Americanization movement, was of secondary importance. Democracy, the right to vote, the rights of common citizens were often mentioned as ideals that, at least initially seemed attractive about America and an important part of becoming a naturalized citizen. But the connection between the abstract ideals and concrete issues was rarely made. (p. 17)

If Americanization is to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it must be institutionalized again - with educational institutions having the primary responsibility for educating immigrants. As stated by the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform in its 1997 Report to Congress, schools continue to play an important role in the process:

...by which immigrants become part of our communities and by which our communities and the nation learn from and adapt to their presence. Americanization means the civic incorporation of immigrants, that is the

cultivation of a shared commitment to the American values of liberty, democracy, and equal opportunity.

Additionally, Rosemary C. Salomone, professor of law at St. John's University School of Law in Jamaica, New York, asserts that the concept of the common school should be replaced with a new model of "commonality" stating that, "education must develop shared values, principles, and political commitments to promote stability, coherence, and justice for free and equal citizenship. In the name of diversity, it must recognize legitimate demands of pluralism and encourage understanding and tolerance," (EdSource, 2002, p. 7).

### **Immigration**

Including both legal and illegal immigrants, the 2000 Census reported a total foreign-born population between 30 and 31 million – of which 13 and 14 million arrived in the 1990s. About eight million of the total 53 million school-age (5-17) children in the United States were the offspring of immigrants who had migrated since 1970 (Camorato, 2001). The new immigrants are diverse in terms of race and color, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds - with nearly 80 percent from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean. With more than 150 languages spoken by immigrant children in U.S. schools, seventy-five percent are of Spanish-speaking origin (Suarez-Orozco, C., 2001).

Documented in the 1990 Census, nearly 6.3 million children between the ages of five and seventeen are English-as-second language (ESL) students - speaking a language other than English at home. Though, as reported in the fall 2001 Harvard Educational Review, while many children of immigrants are over represented as the recipients of prestigious academic awards, others "demonstrate disturbingly high dropout rates - overlooked and

underserved when they enter U.S. schools at the secondary level” (Suarez-Orozco, C., 2001, p. 2).

In “Americanization Now,” John Fonte asserts that “a sizeable number” of new immigrants may learn English and better themselves economically but fail to embrace the American identity. He cites a 2001 longitudinal study of 5,000 children of immigrants (mostly Mexican-American and Filipino-American) conducted by the Russell Sage Foundation that concluded that after studying for four years in American high schools, “patriotic assimilation or self-identification with the American nation actually decreased” (Fonte, 2001, p. 1).

The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform urges a renewed commitment to the education of immigrant children that includes the rapid acquisition of English and the revival of instruction in the “common civic culture that is essential to citizenship” from kindergarten through grade 12. “Learning English is an essential part of the civic education process. Language is both the vehicle and the most profound expression of culture . . . English as a Second Language (ESL) students can achieve higher levels of language development while learning subject matter for effective civic participation” (Pereira, 1993, p. 2). Such is the example when California Literacy received one of twelve grants from the United States Department of Education in May of 2000 to develop ESL curriculum incorporating civics education while students use their emerging English language skills to problem solve and apply content lessons beyond the school setting.

If educators recognize the need to unite individuals from many ethnic and racial groups through a process of English language acquisition,

Nowhere is (the) acculturation process more essential than in the area of United States civic culture - government, laws, criminal and civil

rights, and civic values. In their home countries, however, ESL students and their parents may have experienced political systems very different from our own. Some have come from tiny villages where the official law or justice system rarely intrudes. Others arrive from nations where government is repressive and omnipresent. Thus, the need for good civic education is urgent for those new to this culture. To live in any kind of harmony with United States institutions and to make a productive contribution to national democratic life, students from other cultures need both information about and experiences in the political system of the United States. (Pereira, 1993, p. 1)

While California leads the nation in the total number of immigrant students, reporting 1,599,542 English Learners (84.3% Spanish speaking) within the total state school population of 6,244,403 – roughly 26% of the school population in 2002-2003; immigration has also been concentrated in New York, Florida, Texas, and Illinois. However, school systems throughout the United States are facing the impact of educating a growing immigrant population – with over 3.5 million English Language Learners (ELL) students enrolled (Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo, 2001). As a point of demographic illustration, in 2003 the geographically-large and population-sparse state of Idaho reported 18,747 limited English proficient (LEP) students (83.3% Spanish speaking) enrolled in English language-learning programs within the state's total public school population of 248,660 – roughly .07% of the student population.

Accountability plans in most states to achieve the federally-mandated school-based Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) has focused building-level attention on the education and success of all subgroups in the school population. For example, AYP targets for Idaho's LEP students include a measurement of 72% proficient in reading and 60% proficient in math in 2004-2005. Additionally, Idaho will incorporate a statewide language assessment test in 2005. Growth will be measured according to the number and percentage of LEP students who make progress in language acquisition and the number

and percentage of LEP students who attain English proficiency. Borrowing from Thomas Nixon's and Fran Keenan's 1997 research on citizenship preparation for adult ESL learners, immigrant students as English language learners may in fact master the language and literacy needed to pass the exam, but lack what they need to know to be active citizens.

Recognizing the influx of Spanish-speaking students, the 2000 Census documented that 32.5 million Hispanics lived in the United States, and that between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic population increased by approximately 10 million people, accounting for 38 percent of the nation's overall population growth during the decade – with much of the national increase attributed to immigration (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000). Within the Hispanic population, over 11.4 million were children under age 18 residing in the United States in 2000.

Faced with tightening budgets, both large and small school systems are recognizing the economic impact of per-pupil expenditures necessary to bring a student with limited English skills to average performance levels - calculated at an additional \$10,000 per student (Camarota, 2001). Yet, the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform continues to outline the fundamental necessity of highly qualified teachers trained to work with immigrant students, the need for additional federal funding to provide flexibility for instruction, and the linking of funding to performance outcomes to provide resources that educate newcomers in English language skills and “our core civic values.” The Commission asserts that “federal and state funding incentives should promote – not impede – expeditious placement in regular, English-speaking classes” (p. 4).

The goal today, remains what philosopher John Dewey advocated in the mid-1900s when he saw education as a “vehicle for breaking down barriers between groups of people and instilling in them common values and a shared sense of purpose, which would ultimately lead to a more democratic society” (EdSource, 2002, p. 5).

### **Civic Education**

In a 2003 policy brief, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) acknowledged a growing need for the schools to produce citizens who possess the content knowledge about civil issues (how a bill becomes a law), the dispositions of why citizenship is important, and the skills that provide students with a “sense of efficacy and a commitment to be active, principled citizens.”

Citizenship education - as exercised in early twentieth century efforts in Americanization - aims at helping students become “worthy” citizens of the United States, based on the belief that democratic American citizenship is more than an accident of birth (Dynneson, 1999). “It requires that students adopt the shared cultural traits of their society, including a knowledge of its commonly agreed to (social, economic, and political) systems, technologies, values and beliefs, standards of appropriate and acceptable behaviors, and the general consensus on the nature of a fair and just society” (Dynneson, 1999, p. 23). What ECS references as a *comprehensive approach* is necessary for effective civic participation. “State civics or government standards, which guide instruction in nearly every state, generally describe the knowledge needed for a basic understanding of government and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship such as voting. Citizenship education is a more comprehensive approach aimed at instilling in

students the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective civic participation” (ECS, 2003, p. 2)

Law professor, Rosemary C. Salomone contends that while civic education programs are designed to ensure that students will have the opportunity to become informed and ethical citizens, “educators should broaden their discussion of how to develop character or teach civics to include the concept of school as a democratizing institution and the notion of education for democratic citizenship” (Salomone, 2000). Similarly, the efforts of the Center for Civic Education, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the Center on Congress at Indiana University have called for a return to the civic mission of the schools by strengthening civic education and civic engagement at state and local levels. Imploring that “schools must fulfill that responsibility through both formal and informal curricula beginning in the earliest grades and continuing through the entire educational process” (Quigley, 2003).

Be it labeled as citizenship education or civic education, curriculum design should adhere to the positive attributes of an effective program(s). Outlined in the Education Commission of the States and National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) November 2003 draft paper “Young People’s Citizenship Competency in Their Nation, Community and School” (Torney-Purta & Vermeer), the report recommends:

- incorporating strands of civic preparation in designated courses and across the curriculum, through schooling and related community experience,
- including as appropriate didactic instruction, experiential learning, issue-centered classroom discussion, peer interaction outside the classroom,
- emphasizing meaningful learning and authentic engagement,
- expecting students to reason about the support for their own positions and reflecting about their experience in and outside the classroom,
- evaluating students in a developmentally appropriate way based on what they can write about issues or their skills in interpreting information, not just multiple choice tests about easily measured facts,

- connecting to the world outside the classroom not only what's in the textbook,
- allowing different opinions to be expressed not expecting one right answer for every question,
- empowering students to solve problems, and
- making links between subject areas, for example, not necessarily isolating learning to read from reading about their communities and nation.

ECS and NCLC are encouraging that, “citizenship education (should start) simply but sensitively in the early years of elementary school and become increasingly complex, so that by the time students are 14 or 15 they see citizenship as part of their identity,” (Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2003, p. 36). An intentional fostering of civic identity which is articulated and accountable in education policy must include the recognition and treatment of immigrants - who hope to become American citizens - with genuine respect; seeing them as future fellow citizens (Fonte, 2001). For what currently exists is an education system that provides immigrant students with routines that are “mindless and pointless” (Suarez-Orozco, M., 2001, p. 9).

The little teaching that goes on is neither culturally relevant to the immigrant students' backgrounds nor pertinent to the realities of the global culture and global economy these youth will eventually have to face. Consequently, unacceptable numbers of immigrant youth, especially those coming from poor backgrounds, are leaving school before acquiring the tools needed to navigate today's bitterly competitive global economy. (Suarez-Orozco, M., 2001, p. 9)

Reported on September 8, 2004 by Gannett publications, school officials in Houston, Texas, have proposed a school designed specifically for immigrants that would incorporate flexible yearlong schedules, accelerated credit programs and weekend classes. In a district with approximately 12,000 immigrant students, the school would open in 2005 with about 125 students who, in addition to the testing of other content areas, would be held accountable to the state's social studies assessment at grades 8 and 11 which tests that “The student understands rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.”

Although beginning to address immigrant education needs in one district and formally including the testing of the student's knowledge of rights, Texas does not assess its standards related to personal versus civic responsibility, voluntary individual participation, the diversity of perspectives, and/or the importance of leadership. Among the other high immigrant population states, California includes the assessment of civics, citizenship education and/or social studies in its history/social science assessment for grades 8, 10, and 11 on the California Standards Test. The Illinois State Board of Education currently tests 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in the social sciences (history, geography, civics, economics, and government). Whereas many states, including Florida, New York, and Idaho (see introduction), specifically require citizenship education, they fail to include civics, citizenship education or social studies in the state assessments (ECS, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Without a return to the civic mission of the schools and without a comprehensive approach to and accountability of K-12 civic education, students in the United States will risk failure as citizens committed to taking ownership of the community and having a stake in its success. Without dedicated instruction that links English language acquisition to the core of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, immigrant students may never gain the confidence to participate fully and effectively in the political and civic life of their community. All students might well, in fact, enjoy the rights upheld in the U.S. Constitution as a "free" member in this representative democracy, but remain ignorant of the inherited responsibilities owed to maintain that freedom.

In his August 13, 1786 letter to George Wythe, Thomas Jefferson implored that he “Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know . . . that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles, who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.”

The future of the republic is in the hands of today’s students; an educational system that prepares **all** students for that future is the obligation of the republic.

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