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# QUESTIONING PARTICIPATION AND SOLIDARITY AS GOALS OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

ABSTRACT: *According to many governments and educationalists, education should aim to develop dispositions conducive to political participation and solidarity, because democratic citizenship presupposes participation and solidarity. But there are radically different views on the nature of good citizenship. We examine the implications of this dissensus for citizenship education. Education, we contend, should involve and develop autonomy and open-mindedness. We argue that this requires a more critical approach than is possible when political participation and solidarity are conceived of as goals of education.*

Keywords: *citizenship; civic education; democracy; participation; solidarity; service learning.*

In recent decades, citizenship education has attracted a great deal of positive attention. It is seen as a cure for what is thought to ail democracy: lack of participation and lack of solidarity. It is thought that there is too much indifference towards politics, toward social issues, and toward the common good; and insufficient social connectedness and concern for others' welfare. The remedy, it is thought, is for children to develop dispositions conducive to participation and solidarity in school (e.g., Coley and Sum 2012; De Winter 2011; Lautzenheiser et al. 2011; National

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Conference on Citizenship 2010; Torney-Purta and Vermeer Lopez 2006). This view has been quite influential in citizenship education policy in the United States and Europe (Crick 1998; Eurydice 2012; Hoskins et al. 2012; Kerr et al. 2010).

First, we shall argue that the concerns about democracy which motivate the attention for citizenship education are highly contestable. There are radically different views about the merits of political participation and solidarity. We shall then consider the educational consequences of this dissensus: what do the differences of perception and opinion mean for citizenship education?

## Autonomy and Open-Mindedness

A prominent debate on citizenship education in the 1990s, taking place at the intersection of political philosophy and the philosophy of education, focused on whether the government in a liberal democracy should ensure that all children are provided with an education that develops autonomy and open-mindedness. Advocates of the idea that the government does indeed have this obligation emphasized the importance of autonomy and open-mindedness for democratic citizenship. They argued that no one would be in a position to practice democratic citizenship without self-determination and without critical judgment, responsive to relevant evidence and arguments. Everyone, therefore, ought to have these characteristics, and contributing to this goal, it was argued, is a crucial objective of education for democratic citizenship (e.g., Brighouse 1998; Gutmann 1987 and 1995; Levinson 1999).

Those who were on the other side of this debate pointed out the *illiberal* nature of their opponents' (liberal) view. To apotheosize self-determination and critical judgment, they contended, is to assume that a liberal conception of the good life is better than alternative conceptions, jeopardizing the traditional liberal ideal of state neutrality among conceptions of the good. A truly liberal democracy, then, ought to respect the freedom of parents to allow their offspring to be educated in accordance with their convictions, even if these clash with liberal convictions. Therefore, the government in a liberal democracy should not impose compulsory education that aims to develop autonomy and open-mindedness (e.g., Galston 1995; Kukathas 1992; Stolzenberg 1993; Tamir 1995; Tomasi 1995).

In this discussion we, as educational philosophers, will assume that the government may impose education involving and developing autonomy and open-mindedness (van der Ploeg 1998). The classic principle that education should involve and develop autonomy and open-mindedness need not be based on political or social convictions, but can be inspired by an understanding of the nature of learning and a knowledge of didactics, child development, motivation, cognition, and interaction. Indeed, it is a truism supported by various traditions, such as the pragmatism of John Dewey (1916) and Boyd H. Bode (1927), the liberal and analytical tradition of (for instance) Richard Peters (1966) and Israel Scheffler (1973), the German *Geisteswissenschaftliche* tradition of (for instance) Theodor Ballauff (1970) and Dietrich Benner (2001), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2002). Our view, however, is that fostering political participation and solidarity through education is at odds with the development of autonomy and open-mindedness.

## Social Engineering

In an article in 2007, the British political theorist Sir Bernard Crick quoted the mission statement of the well-known Crick report published ten years earlier (the 1998 report of an independent British advisory group chaired by Crick himself):

> We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves. (Quoted in Crick 2007, 235)

This sounds rather idealistic and ideological. In hindsight, however, Crick did not beat around the bush: "The inarticulate major premise or presupposition of the report as written was . . . civic republicanism" (ibid., 236). Crick acknowledges the presence of the bias, but obviously does not see it as a problem.

This bias is not exclusively British; policies elsewhere in Europe and in the United States have similar goals (Eurydice 2012; Hoskins et al. 2012; Kerr et al. 2010; Murphy 2004). Whether labelled republican or liberal (cf.

Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Carr 1991; Hoskins et al. 2012; Kymlicka and Norman 1993; Zimenkova 2013), the bias is still a bias, and that is a problem.

Our concerns are along the lines of the criticism voiced by, among others, Tatjana Zimenkova (2013), Reinhold Hedtke (2013), and Detlef Sack (2013). In chapters in *Education for Civic and Political Participation* (Hedtke and Zimenkova 2013), they criticize what have become the dominant objectives of citizenship education because they presuppose a nonexistent "consensus of goals and wishful contents of citizenship education" (Zimenkova 2013, 37). According to this assumed consensus, citizenship education should focus on conventional virtues, duties, practices, and procedures, such as voting in elections, cooperating, helping one another, tolerating one another, respecting others' views and lifestyles, deliberating and persuading, knowing and practicing one's rights; in this way, it will encourage political participation and social cohesion. But such a consensus would ignore less obedient, less harmonious, and less conformist kinds of activism, involvement, and solidarity, such as agitation, conflict, protest, subversion, and commitment to one's cause. Instead, the primary objective is "the 'smooth' running of democracy" (ibid., 38).

According to Zimenkova, Hedtke, and Sack, the dominant ambition is not only "emancipative activation" but "social engineering" (Sack 2013). It is fueled by concerns about declining political participation, declining faith in public bodies and institutions, the erosion of social cohesion and civil society, and ongoing social and cultural segregation. All of these worries are couched as shortcomings of the populace: "A deficit is diagnosed on the side of the citizens" (Hedtke 2013, 54). In which case the remedy would seem obvious: Citizens should learn to participate, *appropriately*, by showing solidarity and being accommodating. Hedtke calls this perspective "political and societal functionalism" (ibid., 58). He calls the idea that citizenship education has a role in contributing to the proper functioning of politics and society "educational functionalism" (ibid., 60). According to this view, education should be used

> for the production of a more or less predefined set of individual attitudes, competencies and behaviour expected to secure that kind of support of a political system which is perceived as necessary for its persistence or development. . . . Citizenship education runs the risk of being downgraded to

the individual acquisition of civic competencies as a process of socialisation into the existing polity and society. (Ibid., 61, 62)

Following Foucault, Sack (2013, 13–18) discusses this functionalism in terms of "governmentality": Citizenship education should mold citizens' "conduct" and "mindset"; it should foster "self-governance" while at the same time teaching a "certain mentality," a combination of specific "perceptions, attitudes and appraisals." In this way, according to Zimenkova, Hedtke, and Sack, education affirms the prevailing political and social philosophical ideology. Their alternative is for citizenship education to be more open-minded towards citizens' "activism," with more attention and approval of conflict. Rather than being exclusively liberal and republican, it would offer scope for agonistic perspectives (e.g., those adumbrated by Badiou 2013 and Mouffe 2013).

Others have also criticized the dominant view of citizenship education because of its repression of agonistic perspectives (e.g., Börhaug 2005; Pérez Expósito 2014; Ruitenberg 2010 and 2011; Stitzlein 2011; Straume 2015). But while their objection to the one-sidedness of contemporary citizenship education is warranted, their alternative is itself one-sided, as it lacks open-mindedness towards the option of non-participation.

## Non-Participative Citizenship

In its dominant mode, citizenship education teaches that non-participation is an unacceptable option. Nor only is non-participation by choice or as a way of life not presented as a feasible and equally valuable variant of citizenship; it is presented as an unsuitable option. By implication, it treats as illegitimate the view that there is not necessarily a discrepancy between good citizenship and living one's life for oneself.

An example of a philosopher who represents this outlook is Jason Brennan (2011 and 2012). We shall reconstruct his viewpoint.

According to Brennan, the quality of democracy is not dependent on the level of political participation of all citizens for three reasons. First, although it is true that democracy cannot exist when no one participates, it can well exist without everyone participating. Likewise, if no one were to grow grain, there would be no bread and no beer. We would not want this to happen. But it does not follow that everyone should grow grain. It suffices that some people grow grain. The same applies to participation and democracy. Second, democracy does not become more effective

when more citizens participate. There is no empirical evidence that the quality of government or the welfare of a people is dependent on the number of participating citizens. The available research data suggest that there is no such correlation, or, conversely, that there is a correlation, but that participation is dependent on the prosperity and welfare of a people and also on the quality of government, not the other way around. Third, democracy does not become more legitimate when more citizens participate. If many citizens voluntarily relinquish their say because they have faith in other citizens' judgment, the legitimacy of government is not diminished. The quality of democracy is therefore not dependent on the quantity of participation.

Neither, Brennan believes, is political participation a condition of good citizenship. He criticizes the tendency to conceive of civic virtue solely in a political sense. Defining civic virtue as something like "the disposition to promote the common good . . . over purely private ends" Brennan (2011, 46) emphasizes that citizens are able to exercise this virtue in a variety of ways, not all of which must be intentional and involve political commitment. Civic virtue might also be achieved through activities of a non-political nature or without having the common good in mind. Many citizens, he argues, contribute to the common good by conscientiously going about their daily work. The division of labor provides for an "extended system of social cooperation" (ibid., 51) that, in turn, supplies the "background conditions of wealth, opportunity, and cultural progress" (ibid., 50). Hence Brennan's conclusion:

> There are many ways to be a good citizen. Some of these ways are the stereotypical republican ones: voting well, campaigning, pushing for institutional improvements, or engaging in . . . political service. But many activities stereotypically considered private, such as being a conscientious employee, making art, running a for-profit business, or pursuing scientific discoveries, can also be exercises of civic virtue. For many people, in fact, these are better ways to exercise civic virtue. (Ibid., 44)

There are, of course, many possible objections to Brennan's arguments. But however convincing the counterarguments may be, Brennan's position is reasonable enough to warrant the conclusion that the background assumptions of contemporary citizenship education are controversial. The same applies with respect to social involvement.

Philosophers like Brennan are of the opinion that a decline in social involvement does not present much of a problem: Society does not

necessarily become more benevolent when more people are affiliated with societies and organizations or when social relationships are more close-knit. Many see it as a cause for concern that society has become more individualistic and that traditional social relations are eroding. A thriving "civil society" and a large amount of "social capital" are deemed to be vitally important, at both a social and personal level, but we have less and less of this, or so the story goes (e.g., Putnam 2000). Brennan objects by pointing out that freedom contributes to personal well-being, and that community spirit and a close-knit civil society can infringe on freedom and therefore on personal well-being. He also argues that individual freedom has favorable social effects and that a close-knit civil society has adverse social effects. When people are given ample scope to attend to their own affairs, go about their daily work, live their lives, and mind their own business, solidarity can be a side effect.

> Consider artists, entrepreneurs, small-business owners, venture capitalists, teachers, physicians, intellectuals, stock traders, stay-at-home parents, working parents, chefs, janitors, grocery clerks, and others. Each of these kinds of people in one way or another contributes to fostering a worth-while society. They each help create the bundle of goods others in their society receive. . . .They help create the common good of a well-function-ing liberal society, of the background conditions of opportunity and wealth that make it so that other citizens' lives go so well. (Brennan 2011, 52)

The importance of social involvement is therefore as controversial as the importance of political participation. Yet the dominant view of citizenship education treats views such as Brennan's as if they did not exist. Once again, it may be that the agonistic or the non-participative view are inferior to the dominant view. For our argument it suffices that the arguments brought forward in support of the two alternative points of view are reasonable.

## Doing Justice to Diversity

Education should do justice to this diversity.

Up to a point, this occurs automatically. In school the younger generation develops some of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required in order to live in a modern society, including life as a citizen. It is the place where children, for instance, learn to read and write and where they acquire knowledge about nature and history. At the same time, they learn to deal with authority and rules, to consider others, to take

initiative, to ask themselves questions, and so on. At this fundamental level and in this general sense, school education *is* citizenship education. In principle, it can do equal justice to all views about what good citizenship is. For any conception of good citizenship will require some degree of sociability, initiative, reflectiveness, and judgmental skill.

Understood in this way, education is integrally and inherently citizenship education. However, the dominant view finds elementary solidarity inadequate. It expects more of students than the ability to exhibit consideration for others in the classroom. They believe that education should also be committed to teaching social virtues. Dispositions such as solidarity, loyalty, and helpfulness should be practiced and presented to students as important virtues. Our objection is that this approach is inspired by a single understanding of good citizenship. It comes at the expense of competing understandings.

When education fails to do justice to diversity of thought it is indoctrinatory (Callan and Arena 2010), and this not as it should be. We take as our starting point the idea that education should develop autonomy and open-mindedness on the part of the learner. When differences of perception, understanding, and opinion remain concealed from students, they are not encouraged to discover, compare, and evaluate different ideas; they get to know only one of many possible perspectives and, furthermore, they learn to take this one outlook for granted. They are not encouraged to make up their own minds; on the contrary, their ability to make their own judgements and decisions is stifled.

The question we now face is whether there is an alternative that would steer clear of indoctrination while doing more to facilitate citizenship than merely developing elementary competencies. We believe that the only such alternative is to make a variety of perspectives on citizenship part of the subject matter of education.

Indoctrination begins once one allows a specific view of citizenship—a bias—to determine the norms of education. Such a bias cannot be prevented simply by allowing, in the abstract, that alternative views of good citizenship may be normative, even while one norm alone is enacted in the classroom. However, various views may be the *subject matter* of education. This offers a starting point for an "objective" approach to citizenship education.

Our image of an objective approach to citizenship education is as follows. Either concentrated in a separate school subject or spread out over various school subjects such as history, economics, and social studies (or in a combination of spreading and concentrating), students

should acquire an understanding of conflicting perspectives on citizenship. In order to gain more insight into these perspectives, they can (depending on age and aptitude) also become acquainted with various underlying ideologies and traditions and with the historical and social backgrounds of those differences, and familiarized with current discussions on citizenship and the arguments that play a part in such discussions. Citizenship education, conceived in this way, does justice to all perspectives and accomplishes the opposite of indoctrination. The student develops the competency to explore and compare perspectives on good citizenship, to appreciate them, and also to assess which view is the most convincing and is best suited to her. In this way, she develops the capacity to determine for herself how to realize her citizenship.

Citizenship education, in this sense, obviously ties in with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes developed in other parts of education, seeing as it is dependent on these. Not only does it build on elementary competencies, but also on such subjects as history and economics. Citizenship might even form a continuing subject throughout the entire primary and secondary education program, perhaps initially being part of various different learning areas and school subjects and ultimately becoming an independent subject for one or two years.

We shall now illustrate the difference between our proposal and the dominant conception of citizenship education on the basis of three themes. For the first illustration, we return to Bernard Crick.

## Service Learning

In secondary education, service learning is an important method of citizenship education. Students engage in activities outside the classroom that address human and community needs. Crick warns us, however, that service learning can only be true citizenship education when certain conditions are met. As an example he speaks of a class of sixteen-year-olds that organized a musical gathering for the ladies in a home for the elderly.

> Now that was . . . perhaps "good citizenship" but not by itself politically literate "active citizenship." The party for the old people could well have been a fitting culmination or celebration of a prior process of setting out to discover something of the complicated interrelations and policies of the local authority personal social services, the National Health Service, government departments, and the voluntary charitable sector. But that was completely lacking: no preparatory class work or

knowledge-based follow up afterwards. So the students had no informed basis on which to ask why were some of the old people "in a home" and not able to be cared for at home? The students could then have formed some view of how well the arrangements work, what is public policy and perhaps even how it could be improved. The pupils might even have made, as if real citizens, a representation to one or more of the relevant authorities. Some aspects of all that (admittedly one of the most complex of national problems) would surely count as learning for active citizenship, not just the moral motivation and the feel-good value to the individuals involved. (Crick 2007, 246)

Crick is quite right. When service learning concentrates on promoting dispositions without these being embedded in a curriculum in which knowledge and skills, including critical inquiry and judgment, are given ample attention, then it misses the mark as citizenship education:

A knowledge base was needed before the real situation could be understood; and skills of presentation and advocacy were needed if they then had wished to make representations on the basis both of what they found out and what they saw. So a political education in a democracy must be a mixture of knowledge and skills as well as discussion of real issues revealing and clarifying values. (Ibid.)

However, we do not think that Crick is critical enough. He views knowledge and skills as prerequisites of learning to be politically active and socially involved. He fails to appreciate that students also require knowledge and skills, including inquiry and judgment skills, in order to make rational assessments regarding the degree to which they wish to be politically active and socially involved. The development of knowledge and skills and the practice in critical inquiry and judgment should not be subservient to learning how to participate and advocate. That would be indoctrinatory. Education should equip students in such a way as to allow them to reason and determine for themselves what kind of citizens they want to be and how they wish to practice their citizenship.

## Political Efficacy

Citizenship education should not be organized in such a way as to lead students to believe that only specific forms and degrees of participation and solidarity are appropriate or desirable as an embodiment of citizenship, and to shape their behavior accordingly. For a second illustration

of what we mean by this, we turn to political efficacy. The feeling of political efficacy, or confidence in one's own political power ("I can make a difference"), is often advocated as a primary objective of citizenship education (e.g., Schulz et al. 2008), because it influences political participation. This emerges from empirical research (e.g., Niemi et al. 1991), but it is also rather obvious: greater confidence in one's own ability to make a difference motivates attempts to make a difference. The educational conclusion seems a simple one: by increasing political efficacy, education can promote political participation.

A common way of attempting to increase political efficacy through education is learning by doing: students conduct activities that resemble political pursuits, such as service learning, student councils, and classroom debates. Through such activities students experience at first hand that they can make a contribution and that something positive can come out of this.

We have some hesitations concerning political efficacy as an educational goal, because we believe that education has a different function with respect to political efficacy than merely to promote it. The educational norm of developing autonomy and open-mindedness (the principle of non-indoctrination) implies that students must learn to judge their political competence and its effects under varying conditions realistically. Situational and realistic judgment is more befitting to autonomy and open-mindedness than is the simple belief that one can make a difference, because sometimes one cannot make a difference. Thus, students might benefit from learning that good intentions and strong commitment can founder when confronted with structural impediments and can run aground in procedural shambles. Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer (2006) correctly point out that this ought not to be an unintended and unforeseen effect of project learning. It should be an educational objective to gain a *realistic* picture of what is possible. We believe that in order to do so, students must acquire knowledge of the relationship between politics and society, of power relationships within society, of social conflicts, of dynamics within and among institutions, of policy making and bureaucracy, and of conflicting views about these topics. Such knowledge fosters their assessment of what kind of citizens they wish to be and how to realize their citizenship in practice. Gaining this knowledge is not possible without an education in which the students can themselves investigate and assess the differences between perspectives on citizenship.

## *Voting*

In line with the previous argument, we think it is educational malpractice to attempt to boost political efficacy by giving students the impression that political participation always or usually helps. What education should *not* do, for instance, is to mislead students into thinking that it is always worthwhile for everyone to vote.

In the run-up to the American presidential elections in 2012, we received through the Civic Education mailing list of the American Political Science Association (APSA) various practical recommendations on how we might stimulate students in higher education to vote; or as some put it: "Helping students surmount political cynicism." In this context Paul Loeb, Alexander Astin, and Parker Palmer (2012) urged educators to

> provide a rationale for why their involvement matters. This means offering examples of how close electoral races can be. . . . We might begin by reminding our students of the very small margins by which critical elections have been won and stressing the importance of their vote, whoever they choose to vote for. That's true both because of the immediate impact it may have, and because their participation will set a pattern in their lives going forward. We can talk about the 537 vote Florida total that handed George Bush the presidency in 2000, or the 312 votes by which Al Franken won the 2008 Minnesota Senate race. Students may assume that their votes will be inconsequential, but multiplied by those of all their peers, they matter, time and again.

Simple math proves how important every single vote is, according to Loeb and his colleagues. This argument is diametrically opposed to the calculations of political scientists: the chance your vote makes a difference in large-scale elections is extremely small (cf. Downs 1957). The argument of Anthony Downs and others is easy to grasp. Imagine: millions of voters have to choose between two candidates, A and B. The single vote of one voter will be decisive only if exactly half of the electorate opts for candidate A and the other half for candidate B. What are the chances of this happening? Concrete examples of close electoral races, such as occurred in Florida in 2000, are highlighted by political scientists in order to show that even in such situations the chance of a single vote being decisive is extremely small: Florida was unprecedented, and in any case, 537 votes are not equivalent to one vote. A single voter still would not have made a

difference in Florida (Hardin 2009). Even if every vote counts, an individual vote almost never makes a significant difference. An article in the *British Journal of Political Science* recently began by asking, "Why do people participate in mass politics, despite the obvious fact that any individual's actions have roughly zero chance of being decisive in any meaningful political context?" (Gerber et al. 2014, 241). Perhaps part of the answer is that voters have been misled by citizenship education into thinking that they can, individually, make a difference.

If it is questionable that a single vote is likely to influence a mass election, education should not gloss over this fact. On the contrary, it deserves to be discussed in school. This is more suited to education than is ignoring the problem with an eye to promoting political efficacy. At the same time, young people can learn to ascertain and comprehend the reasons why many people vote. These might include civic duty, a desire to gain others' esteem (Gerber et al. 2014), demonstrating commitment or loyalty (Lupia and McCubbins 1998), "signaling goodness" (Nelson and Greene 2003), setting a good example, believing that voting is not an individual but a collective effort (Tuck 2008), or failing to recognize the minuscule chance that a single vote will matter (Bennett and Friedman 2008). By examining and evaluating such reasons, students would improve their ability to decide for themselves whether to vote.

<p style="text-align:center">*       *       *</p>

We have argued for a type of citizenship education that familiarizes students with opinions about citizenship so they may find their own way. By way of contrast, consider the views expressed in "Democracy at Risk" (Macedo 2005), a report written by a group of political scientists and philosophers under the auspices of the APSA. It is an argument in favor of institutional innovation aimed at enhancing civic engagement. In the introduction to the report, the researchers explain why the promotion of political and social participation is important: because the quality and legitimacy of government are dependent on citizens' participation, and because participation has a positive effect on the lives of individual citizens as well as on community life (ibid., 4, 5). The authors recognize that there can be different opinions about whether levels of participation are indeed worrisomely low or about how necessary or desirable it is that participation be stimulated:

> Not all observers—not even all political scientists—agree with our basic premise that citizen engagement is fundamental to healthy democratic politics. Some are untroubled, even comforted, by low levels of citizenship participation. There are, indeed, numerous arguments against our effort to bolster citizen activity. (Ibid., 10)

The report then reconstructs and reviews several counterarguments (Macedo 2005, 10–16). The thoughtful consideration of these counterarguments proves how reasonable the debate is, as it concerns matters on which experts disagree on rational grounds. "Democracy at Risk" offers a fine characterization of the debate, but then goes on to disregard it: "In the end, then, we stick to our guns: accountable, effective, and legitimate government requires substantial civic and political engagement by the people themselves" (ibid., 13).

When it comes to the justification of policy proposals or to determining policy, this approach is not necessarily problematic. If debate does not conclude with a decision, nothing will ever happen. This also applies to educational policy, not only at macro level (such as national policy) and the meso level (school policy), but also at the micro level of deciding how to teach. Ideally, a teacher will be familiar with ongoing debates about, for instance, optimal classroom management and didactics, but in the classroom will always have to choose a specific type of classroom management, a specific way of helping students to learn; otherwise, teaching will not happen. The same applies to the choice of subject matter and immediate objectives, to *what* teachers teach and students learn. However, pragmatically motivated choices of subject matter and immediate objectives do have to take elementary educational principles into consideration, among them the principle of non-indoctrination. If there are substantial differences of perception and opinion regarding an issue, the subject should be dealt with as an object to disagreement. No single point of view may prescribe the content; the various perspectives should *be* the content.

Thus, if there is difference of opinion and perception regarding the value of social and political participation, as is recognized by the authors of "Democracy at Risk," these differences should be the subject of teaching and learning in citizenship education. After all, students must be able to decide for themselves which perspective should determine their actions —a presumption that is not only fundamental to education, but to democracy.

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