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# Close All Borders: A Study of Violence and Civility in an Eighth Grade Classroom

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Keywords: civility, shared fate, citizenship education, immigration

## Abstract

*Students in an eighth grade classroom call out to close all borders to the United States and shoot down illegal immigrants on sight. This paper examines two curricular responses to the violence in the language of this group of fourteen-year-olds in relationship to the cultivation of civility. Civility is often defined as good manners or polite behavior. This is a shallow definition in comparison to how French philosopher, Balibar, develops a conception of civility closely related to the word's Latin root of civitas or citizenship. For Balibar (2016, 2001), civility is a set of concrete practices and conditions that make collective participation in democracy possible. These conditions rely on the recognition of human rights, or at minimum, the right to have rights, and on an understanding of shared fate. Drawing on the*

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*analysis of the curricular responses, specific criteria are proposed for pedagogy that cultivates Balibar's robust sense of civility.*

### **Introduction**

**A**n eighth grade teacher closed down a student initiated discussion on immigration soon after the following exchange with two students:

Michael: In all seriousness, I really don't see why we should have immigrants, legal or illegal, come here because it's already over-populated.

John: Exactly.

Teacher: So you think we should just close the borders right now? So the only way you can become a citizen is to do what? To be born here? We wouldn't let in any new people?

Michael: Right.

Teacher: Wow.

In later discussions, many students picked up the call to close all borders and went further to say that all illegal immigrants should be shot down on sight. The violence toward others and strong anti-immigration views expressed in classroom discussions caught the teacher, student teacher, and me, a University researcher, by surprise.

This discussion took place in 2010 in a rural northeastern town six years before the elections in which Donald Trump took the office of president. I return to the study because the opinions and emotions expressed by the middle school students illustrate the deep rift in the United States brought to the forefront in the national elections. The conversation would not be as surprising today. Some version of a call to close borders has become commonplace in public discourse, as evidenced in debate around travel bans and visas, building a wall on the border with

Mexico, and separating children from their parents at the border.<sup>1</sup> Civility is often suggested as a way to bridge rifts in democratic societies, but it is ineffective at best if civility refers to surface politeness without a concern for the common good (Hsu, 2014; Newkirk, 2016). As problematic as current power plays under the guise of civility may be, the concept of civility linked to the Latin *civilitas*—a responsibility to society—is vital to our shared life as citizens of a nation-state and as global citizens. Etienne Balibar (2016, 2001) offers us a robust conception of civility for what he calls our era of global violence. This conception of civility can inform pedagogy aimed at addressing violence.

Civility can be a way of “creating, recreating, and conserving the set of conditions within which politics as collective participation in public affairs is possible or at least not absolutely impossible” (Balibar, 2001, p. 15). Balibar hypothesizes that cruelty comprised of forms of extreme violence, intentional or systemic, physical or moral, threatens the very possibility of politics. He names citizenship and segregation, asylum and migration, mass poverty and genocides as crucial “cosmopolitical” issues in a topography of cruelty that threatens our very ability to engage in civic life. Thus, for Balibar (2001), “democratic citizenship in today’s world cannot be separated from an invention of concrete forms and strategies of civility” (Balibar, 2001, p. 16). Let me be clear: Balibar’s conception of civility is not about gentle persuasion or surface politeness in public discourse. Rather, it refers to political action or civic practice that must be continually reinvented by those involved. Civility becomes an ethics required for collective participation in democracy, and in Balibar’s conception, it is rooted in the recognition of human rights and an understanding of our shared fate (Van Gunsteren as cited in Balibar, 2001).

In this paper, I draw on classroom conversations and student work related to the call to close all borders to examine pedagogy in relationship

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<sup>1</sup> For further study, I recommend articles on The Brookings Institute, Pew Research Center, and *The Atlantic* websites.

to civility, shared fate, and aims of human rights education. This focus is drawn from a larger research project on moral conversations framed by the idea of sustaining democracy. Broadly stated, the intent of the project was to look closely at when and how moral conversations were taken up in middle school classes. Moral conversation was defined broadly as any time a consideration of the values and beliefs that inform people's understanding of how we should treat one another, what rights we should have, and what responsibilities we have to others was brought into lectures, discussions, or assignments (Noddings, 1994; Simon, 2003). Within this broad definition, a kind of moral conversation I hoped to find was described by Cornel West (2004) in *Democracy Matters*:

The fight for democracy has ever been one against the oppressive and racist corruptions of empire. To focus solely on electoral politics as the site of democratic life is myopic. Such a focus fails to appreciate the crucial role of the underlying moral commitments and visions and fortifications of the soul that empower and inspire a democratic way of living in the world. (p. 15)

Specific research questions included:

1. How do middle school students talk about the “underlying moral commitments and visions and fortifications of the soul that have inspired others to a democratic way of living in the world”?
2. How do students talk about their own moral commitments?
3. When and how are moral conversations invited by the curriculum and pedagogy?
4. When and how are moral conversations brought up by the middle school students?

Even with a broad definition, I found few moral conversations in the course of the six-month study in an eighth grade Social Studies class of 23 students. One of these conversations was the student initiated discussion of immigration with which I opened. This first recorded conversation on

immigration and some of the conversations that followed were deeply troubling in the students' use of violent language toward others and seeming lack of recognition of the other—in this case, immigrants, documented or undocumented—as another person.

The lessons, discussions, and student work linked to the call to close all borders comprise a case study at the intersection of moral, civic, and human rights education (HRE). There are logical linkages between moral education and HRE. Broadly stated, both moral education and HRE are concerned with developing, through educational means, respect for fundamental human freedoms, a sense of dignity within people and the promotion of freedom, tolerance, equity, and harmony amongst people (Print, Ugarte, Naval, & Mihr, 2008). Civic or citizenship education should include knowledge of the history of human rights, at a minimum. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) state this connection thus: “in order for a democracy to not only maintain but also to sustain, its citizens must be educated to participate in ethical and political discourse concerning war, peace, social justice and the enforcement of international human rights” (p. 237). Education for participation in ethical and political discourse is a concrete form of civility and involves aims of moral, civic, and human rights education. It is also the case that little attention was given to moral or human rights education during the six months of observation.

After closing down the students' brief discussion on current immigration, the teacher directed her class back to the textbook, *The American Journey* (Appleby, Brinkley & McPherson, 2000). In the close to a thousand pages of this widely-used textbook, there is only one mention of human rights and that is in a section titled “The Carter Presidency” in which it is stated that Carter's foreign policy based on human rights was limited (Appleby, Brinkley & McPherson, 2000, p. 898). There is one paragraph on the United Nations in a chapter titled “The Cold War Era.” There is no mention at all of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). By and large, the topic of human rights is not included in curriculum frameworks and standards for Social Studies in the United States. Only 39 states mention “human rights” in their social studies standards, and among them, only 22 contain the UDHR (Human Rights

Education USA, 2014). The National Council for Social Studies adopted the official position that “Human Rights Education, in both its civil and humanitarian aspects, is a necessary element of social studies programs and should be integrated throughout the educational experience of all learners from early childhood through advanced education and lifelong learning” (Blanchard, 2016, p. 10). Students in the United States, as elsewhere, should have the opportunity to learn about the history of human rights.

Surveying definitions and models of human rights education, Bajaj (2011) outlines a schema of three approaches to HRE based on ideology: a) global citizenship, b) coexistence, and c) transformative action. Briefly stated, in HRE for global citizenship the underlying beliefs support human rights as a new global political order. The content focuses on information on International Covenants, norms and standards with the intent that international awareness and interdependence will lead to membership in the international community. The belief that HRE has a role in healing and reconciliation underlies HRE for coexistence. Content in this approach focuses on conflict resolution techniques and information on pluralism and diversity. The desired outcome is that inter-group contact and mutual understanding will lead to social cohesion. Lastly, HRE for transformative action is supported by a belief in radical politics of inclusion and social justice. In this approach, historic and ongoing violations are a part of the content, as well as people’s movements for social justice. The hope is that activism and participation will lead to social change. Bajaj (2011) suggests that these models of HRE—global citizenship, coexistence, and transformative action—offer productive frameworks for analyzing the impact of HRE and the experience of participants. Bajaj’s schema draws on HRE in contexts beyond formal educational settings; however, there are clear parallels within the context of formal schooling.

The ideology of global citizenship parallels what is sometimes called the declarative approach to HRE: an approach which focuses on knowledge about international covenants and human rights law might be covered in a textbook (Blanchard, 2016). The outcomes of HRE for coexistence have much in common with the goals of multicultural education and peace education (Banks & Banks, 2007; Harris, 2004). HRE aimed at

transformative action has clear parallels to critical pedagogy and liberatory education or education for social justice (Freire, 1970; Grant & Gibson, 2013). The three approaches can work in concert. Indeed, the Declaration of Human Rights in itself can be seen as an outline of a transformative agenda for schools (Blanchard, 2016; MacNaughton & Frey, 2015). I utilize the models of global citizenship, coexistence, and transformative action in my analysis of the lesson design, classroom dialogue, and student work presented here.

In the next sections, I first describe the context of my study and provide an overview of the class dialogues included in the paper. I then elaborate what Balibar means by civility and connect his conception of civility to goals of human rights education and the idea of citizenship education based on shared fate (Golmohamad, 2009; Williams, 2003). Following which I turn to analyze three specific lessons and data on students' responses in relationship to civility, shared fate, and the aims of human rights education. My analysis supports the essential role of narratives in engaging the heart or sentiment and developing moral reasoning to begin to recognize human rights and contribute to strategies of civility in communities of shared fate (Canlas, Argenal, & Bajaj, 2015; Zembylas, 2017).

### **Study Context**

The research was conducted in a rural northeastern town with a population of a little more than 3,000 and very little ethnic diversity. Indeed, in census data current to the study, 97% of the population claimed to be white only. The foreign born population of the town was at 101, with immigration primarily from Europe, North America, and Asia. The school demographics were 553 Caucasian students, 14 Asian/Pacific Islander students, 6 Hispanic students, 3 African American students, and one Native American student. It is of note that the three students on census data as African-American were born in Africa and adopted as infants. The Asian/Pacific Islander students are primarily of Cambodian descent whose parents came to the United States with refugee status and resettled as a group in the area in the early 1980s. The median household income in the town is



\$53,000 with 31% of households with less than \$25,000 in annual income and 5% of households with over \$200,000 in annual income. Fifteen percent of students in the school qualify for free and reduced lunch. The community has frequent community events, including two arts festivals, several parades, and summer concerts. There is a thriving downtown with local stores and restaurants.

Extra-curricular activities at the middle school include beekeeping, tending the chickens, working in the green-house or school garden as well as band, chorus, and several team sport options. All students are required to complete community service hours. Students were divided into middle school teams and rotated between two teachers for academic classes. The school had been awarded middle school of the year by the state two years prior to the study for academic achievement and positive school environment. The principal of the school opted not to lock the doors of the school at the time other area schools limited access because of his commitment to a welcoming school environment for the students and community. The principal welcomed my proposed research because there was so little emphasis on social studies in comparison to language arts, mathematics, and sciences. In regard to West's statement concerning moral commitments and fortifications of the soul, he brought up his interest in the U.S. Civil War and how he shared with eighth graders each year that people fight for the person that they are standing next to on the battlefield.

Student views on immigration burst out when the class was covering the Dust Bowl of the 1930s in the central United States and the migration of people from Oklahoma to California. The classroom teacher asked "What do you think happened when all of the people who were poor and desperate showed up at the same time in California?" A student answered, "They got, like, pushed away partly." The teacher prompted students to picture the situation in their minds: "They all show up at once. There's a whole bunch of them and they're looking for jobs." A student commented that there probably weren't that many jobs. The teacher went on to explain how workers began to organize and fight against the unfair labor practices. She talked about how poor the migrants from Oklahoma were as she directed the students to look Dorothea Lange's portrait of a mother and two of her

children with their faces tucked on her shoulders. The teacher commented that it was “even worse for people who were not white, who were Hispanics or people who had formerly been slaves.”

At the mention of Hispanics, two male students begin to complain about illegal immigrants stealing our jobs. The teacher tried to direct the conversation back to the textbook, but students continued to talk about current immigration. So she gave in saying “Okay. Well, let me ask you a question, because this seems to come up a lot this year and people aren’t sympathetic: Why do you think someone would leave their home to try to come to our country in the first place?”

The teacher encouraged the students to consider the pros and cons of immigration by asking them if there are ways in which immigrants contribute to the country. The students had nothing positive to say: they take jobs from Americans, they deal drugs, they can’t speak English and the schools have to spend more money to teach them English. The teacher said “People I’ve met from California tell me that when you have neighbors and friends who have come here illegally you don’t have such a harsh view. You think of that person as another human.” A student countered the statement with “I lived in California and I’m not sympathetic.” Another student brought up a family friend who teaches in Florida and said that the “illegal kids in her classroom are really troublesome.” He concluded, “She says that the ones who are illegal are always trouble.” It is at this point that the conversation I opened with between Michael, John, and the teacher took place. Several students asked for a debate, but the teacher was reluctant because all the student perspectives voiced were anti-immigration. She directed the lesson back to the textbook.

Going back to the textbook ended what had become a shouting match among a few male students in the classroom. Returning to the textbook is both a familiar and problematic response. If the response to the student initiated conversation on immigration had ended there, the potential for a deeply moral conversation, as well as the opportunity to meet social studies goals more broadly, would have been missed. In the discussion, students made relevant connections between the 1930s and current issues without teacher prompting. The problem was the inaccuracy

in the comments and the unwillingness, at least of the loudest students, to question stereotypes. Although current immigration was not addressed in the textbook or curriculum standards, the teacher, student teacher, and I worked in lessons related to current immigration to respond to student interest and to act on our concerns about student comments. Our first lesson was a deliberative dialogue based on the guide *The New Challenges of American Immigration: What Should We Do* (National Issues Forums NIF, 2003). The second was an interactive lesson focused on refugees that utilized a short film, along with statistics and two short clips on advocacy. The last lesson involved students in writing policies for immigration, including undocumented and refugees, for the island countries they created as a summative assessment of their study of government at the end of the school year. Before examining these lessons and student response, I elaborate Balibar's conception of civility in communities of shared fate and consider ideas of what citizenship education for shared fate might look like (Golmohamad, 2009; Williams, 2003; Zembylas, 2012).

### **Civility and Human Rights**

Civility is often thought of as being polite or formal courtesy in speech and behavior. Balibar's conception contrasts sharply with this kind of surface politeness which can limit speech and mask conflict. As noted earlier, Balibar (2001) uses the concept of 'civility' to refer to a meta-politics or politics of politics: "a set of conditions within which politics as collective participation in public affairs is possible or not entirely impossible" (Balibar, 2001, p.15). This set of conditions does not mean the suppression of conflicts or antagonisms in society as if they were always the "harbingers of violence and not just the opposite" (Balibar, 2001, p. 15). Civility, in this view, is a set of policies and concrete actions that support participation and collective engagement in civic life.

In constructing his argument, Balibar turns to Hannah Arendt's consideration of human versus political rights. Arendt's notion of a right to have rights, Balibar (2001) writes, refers to a continuous process in which a minimal recognition of the belonging of human beings to the "common"

sphere of existence (and therefore also of work, culture, public and private speech, etc.) *already* involves a totality of rights, and makes it possible (Balibar, 2001, p. 18). Balibar calls this the insurrectional element of democracy, which predetermines every constitution of a democratic state. A democratic state cannot only consist of statuses and rights ascribed from above; it requires the direct participation of the *demos*. Balibar asserts that we should not consider the choice between access to and denial of the rights of citizenship as a speculative issue: It represents a concrete challenge. A politics or ethics of civility becomes a set of initiatives which ensure and invite broad participation, and which link citizenship to human rights.

Balibar concludes that if all political communities today (from territories to networks) are communities of fate, then they are communities that already include difference and conflict. He supports the idea that for every individual in every group there must be at least one place in the world where he/she is recognized as a citizen and hence given the chance to enjoy human rights (Van Gunsteren, as cited in Balibar, 2001, p. 28). As to where this is, Balibar (2001) writes

If communities are communities of fate, the only possible answer is the radical one: anyplace where individuals and groups belong, wherever they happen to live, therefore to work, bear children, support relatives. The recognition of and institution of citizen's rights have to be organized beyond the exclusive membership in one community; they should be located, so to speak, on the borders, where so many of our contemporaries actually live. (p. 28)

The important question, for Van Gunsteren and Balibar, is “permanent access to rather than simply entitlement to citizenship, and therefore humanity” (Balibar, 2001, p. 28). A politics of civility, in this view, is an active and collective civil process, rather than a simple legal status.

In sum, civility can be conceived of as a response to the violence of our globalized world and, as such, is rooted in a commitment to human rights. Balibar offers a robust conception of civility which moves us far

beyond a surface politeness to inventing concrete forms and strategies of civility within communities of fate aimed at emancipation. By advocating that citizenship rights move beyond the confines of the nation-state, Balibar is not suggesting that countries should have open borders. Rather, he is suggesting a reconceptualization of civility as a set of actions and policies in which all involved in a specific situation can participate in the resolution or policies that bear on that situation, and that these forums or institutions are located, either figuratively or literally, at the borders (Balibar, 2001, p. 28). It shifts the focus of our understanding of civility from manners to what we actually do and say in recognition of human rights. I outline Williams' (2003) ideas about what citizenship education for shared fate and then return to the student discussions.

### **Communities of Shared Fate**

The idea of a community of fate is descriptive: Our lives are intertwined with others in ways we perceive and ways we cannot. Our actions often have significant consequences on others, sometimes unforeseen. This makes intuitive sense. Writing about citizenship education in diverse, democratic societies, Williams (2003) challenges the premise that meaningful citizenship and stable constitutional order must be grounded in a shared identity among citizens and develops an idea of citizenship as membership in a community of shared fate as a viable alternative.

Citizenship as a shared identity means that individuals' understanding of who they are is in part defined as loyalty to their country. Political membership is internalized as an *affective* bond to the political community and its other members (Williams, 2003, p.210). Citizens in a liberal democratic state are meant to be bound together by the shared values of equality, freedom, and toleration. The project of democratic education has been to inculcate these values in young citizens. Williams (2003) points out that a dark side to citizenship as shared identity is a proclivity to read the identity of the dominant group into the content of citizen identity and what has historically been a conscious and intentional marginalization of women and ethnic minorities. Williams is not confident

that inculcating citizen identity through democratic education is fully compatible with respect for diversity. Nor is she persuaded that this educational project is the most promising route to robust democratic citizenship in diverse societies, particularly in an age of globalization.

For Williams (2003), what connects us in a community of shared fate is that our actions have an impact on other identifiable human beings, and other human beings' actions have an impact on us. Williams notes that the idea of shared fate is similar to John Dewey's idea of a 'public.' It is not an ethical community as such in that we are not bound to each other by a set of common values, but by relations of interdependence, which may or may not be positively valued by its members. In Williams' view, communities of shared fate may be more or less legitimate. Legitimacy consists in the ability to justify actions to those who are affected by them according to reasons they can accept, thus: "Having a sense of ourselves as members of a community of fate entails telling (true) stories about how we came to be connected to particular other human beings, and believing that we are responsible for constructing that connection in a manner that is justifiable to them" (Williams, 2003, p. 229).

Williams proposes that like citizenship education for shared identity, citizenship education for shared fate would include learning basic skills of critical reasoning, of speech and argument, as well as building an awareness of public affairs, because citizens need these skills for participation in deliberative activities. Students would still need to know about civil and political rights and in particular, learn about the history of struggle for these rights. But in addition to these elements, citizenship education for shared fate, Williams (2003) proposes, would include a focus on dialogue across difference. In other words, citizenship education would include a commitment to and understanding of communicative ethics. For Williams, democratic legitimacy in a diverse society requires that we engage in an exchange of reasons about matters that affect us jointly, and that we do not seek simply to impose our will on others. "Bringing the requirements of legitimacy together with the fact of sometimes-unwelcome diversity means that citizens must learn to engage in democratic discourse through which they can come to understand (even if imperfectly or incompletely) others'

experience from others' perspectives" (Williams, 2003, p. 237). Williams (2003) continues:

As Seyla Benhabib and other feminist theorists have argued, following Hannah Arendt's conception of political judgement, this activity requires a capacity for "enlarged mentality", a capacity to "make present to oneself what the perspectives of others involved would or could be, and [to ask] whether I could 'woo their consent' in acting the way I do. (p. 237)

For Benhabib, it is good if one can talk to others involved, but the capacity to "make present to oneself" another's perspective is a thought experiment and thus can be problematic because of mistaken assumptions about what another may think or feel (Young, 1990).

In short, Williams (2003) concludes, an education for citizenship as shared fate would stress the development of three dimensions of human agency that tend not to be stressed in other accounts of civic education:

- "The capacity of enlarged thought;
- The imaginative capacity to see oneself as bound up with others through relations of interdependence as well as through shared history and institutions;
- The capacity to reshape the shared practices and institutions that shape one's environment through direct participation" (Williams, 2003, pp. 238-239).

The outline of citizenship education that Williams provides, both what should be retained from citizenship education for shared identity and the three additional capacities, would seem to support the creation of concrete forms of civility. Williams focuses on an imaginative capacity to see oneself as bound up with others, while I read Balibar to focus on actual people – one is a part of communities and networks that involve conversation and dialogue with other people. We learn the concrete ways that we are bound up with others by exploring the impact of actions

through conversation and through research. The capacity to reshape the shared practices and institutions that shape one's environment through direct participation seems to be exactly what Balibar describes as inventing forms of civility. Notably missing from Williams' proposal is any reference to human rights. Williams focuses on citizenship in a nation-state; while Balibar's project moves to a sense of global citizenship grounded in human rights.

I return to the classroom to critique curricular responses that followed the initial conversation. The first is a deliberative dialogue grounded in communicative ethics. The lesson was unsuccessful in addressing the violence in students' responses and creating anything like enlarged thought.

### **Deliberative Dialogue**

A week after the discussion of immigration that erupted in a textbook lesson on the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma in the 1930s, we, the classroom teacher, the student teacher, and I, engaged the class in a deliberative dialogue. The deliberative dialogue was a structured conversation following guidelines in *The New Challenges of American Immigration: What Should We Do?* (NIF, 2003). In the formal structure of the dialogue, students were asked to consider the following approaches to immigration: (1) America's Changing Face: Is There Too Much Difference; (2) A Nation of Immigrants: Remembering our Heritage; and (3) A Matter of Priorities: Putting Economics First. Our hope was that the three approaches outlined in the materials would encourage the students to consider multiple points of view. After a brief overview of the format, students were led directly into the dialogue.

The first approach advocated admitting fewer immigrants and facilitating assimilation into American culture. The discussion began with a student stating that they [the person who has immigrated] were born in their country for a reason. When others were encouraged to speak, this is what was said in answer to the questions of whether the United States should admit fewer immigrants:



Student 1: As an American, I think we're getting overcrowded if we let immigrants in.

Student 2: I think it's a pretty good idea, because if we let everybody in our country, our culture will not be our own.

Student 3: I think we should stop letting them in maybe for just a little while because the more we let in at a time, I feel it's getting to be too much that you have to learn to speak Spanish. We shouldn't have to accommodate others, fine if we don't have to accommodate you and you're going to follow our rules.

Student 4: And just like one thing if we let everyone in there would be a lot of people in our country so the population is going to be out of control.

Student 5: Yeah, we're going to be like overpopulated and the towns all around are going to be like cities.

Instructor: Does anybody think this is a bad idea and we shouldn't slow it down?

Student 1: We should stop it.

Student 6: Well, our country was kind of made of immigrants, we should be allowed to have some, maybe not everyone all at once, but this country was made for immigrants.

In sum, those students who thought it was a good idea to limit immigration cited concerns about too many people, losing our culture, and having to learn Spanish. Only one counter-argument was voiced.

The second approach outlined the idea that immigration built America and therefore, we shouldn't abandon refugees who, like our forefathers, seek freedom. We should welcome newcomers, but find better

ways to support them and help them grow into Americans. Only one student expressed agreement with this point of view, and it was a qualified agreement: “We really do need immigration and a lot of people from different cultures have a lot to offer, but I don’t think we should let in as many as want to come in.” The reasons given for not welcoming immigrants were the following: people coming here don’t have much to offer, we just see them as cheap labor, we have enough diversity in our country already, there are way too many Hispanic people, we give our money to them, but it’s our money which we make for us, like 40% of our population, not 40, the biggest part of our population is Hispanic, and they are trying to influence from Mexico what should happen here on our soil. The conversation ended with this student comment:

Um, we really don’t have to welcome them. It says right here “We must welcome them” but I don’t think we really have to. If we want, we could shut the country from immigrants and say no more immigrants could come. That might be selfish and stuff, but it might be the best fix right now for the problem that we have.

During the discussion of this approach, the instructor tried to elicit a response from a student whose family immigrated to the United States from Cambodia. He responded “Really, you’re going to do this? No, I’m going to pass.” The student had his head on his desk throughout the dialogue.

The third approach focused on economics and presented the argument that we should limit the number of newcomers because it impacts those that are already here. Competition from immigrants keeps wages down and even takes jobs away from Americans. We pay higher taxes to support education and social services for newcomers. The student conversation on this approach focused on whether immigrants are only taking jobs that Americans don’t want. There was disagreement about this, as the following exchange illustrates:

Student 1: About them taking jobs people don’t want, the more immigrants that come in do take jobs that Americans want.

Student 2: My feeling is that well, they are going to take jobs that people want because we are getting to a point and time where people are desperate and they might need jobs like those. We might need those jobs.

Student 3: Well, if we let a lot of people in and they're like using up the wealth, there won't be enough to go around.

The instructor asked if there was any benefit to our economy by having immigrant workers. "Do you pay less at the supermarket, for example?" A student responded, "This is going to sound mean and such but cheaper labor is..." and he shook his head. In discussing the third approach, students agreed that we couldn't afford to let immigrants into the country because there wasn't enough money and jobs to go around and there were desperate people already in the country. One student commented, "Money doesn't grow on trees."

The deliberative dialogue reinforced the anti-immigration views students held going into the experience and indeed, pre- and post-surveys show that students who began the class without strong views one way or another became convinced that the borders should be closed. I want to point to three weaknesses in the deliberative dialogue. One, it quickly became clear that students lacked the background knowledge to fully discuss the issues. The materials as we used them didn't provide enough information, enough facts to prompt questioning what might turn out to be misconceptions, and the format didn't really support this research. Second, in the absence of narratives or stories, students had little understanding of what others might be going through. Narratives recounting the experience of particular people would have put a human face on the issues. With more time, videos and short texts might have been incorporated to include the voices of recent or potential immigrants. My third concern is that non-dominant voices were silenced. The same opinions were repeated multiple times, usually beginning with a statement by one of four outspoken male students. There were points where the instructor could have better

supported other voices and perhaps drawn in the students who were silent; however, I question whether the format of a deliberative dialogue can provide the safety that students need to talk about their experience or opinions when it differs from the most popular or loudest stated view.

The deliberative dialogue failed miserably as a response to violence and fear expressed in students' views on immigration. The dialogue as implemented did not support critical thinking or help students develop the capacity for enlarged thought. The students did not see themselves as connected to others: The overwhelming response at the end was to close the border and lock your doors. Nothing in the dialogue encouraged students to consider how their lives might be tied to others, and nothing supported solidarity. A rural town in a northeastern state with little ethnic or racial diversity is a difficult place to build a sense of shared fate, as compared to the example Williams provides of a community in Toronto. But the most difficult aspect of Williams' proposal for a citizenship education based on shared fate is the commitment to legitimacy: to holding yourself accountable to explain your actions to what may be a distant other. Given the eighth graders' expressed views, it seems particularly tricky to tell true stories of how we are connected and to accept a responsibility to justify actions to those who are affected by them with reasons they can accept. Students would need to justify closing the border with reasons those at the border can accept. This seems a responsibility that few would try to meet or could meet.

### **Shelter from a Storm**

At the end of the deliberative dialogue, the teacher asked students to stand in a corner of the room to indicate their response to the question "Should the United States help people who are fleeing from danger?" Only one of the twenty-three students stood in the corner that said yes, we should help. And thus, a second specific lesson was planned for the next week.

The instructor began the lesson by introducing the concept of refuge and eliciting from students what connections they made with the word, where they had heard it before. Not surprisingly, song lyrics were quoted

and the class came to a definition of refuge as a safe place, a place you can find shelter from a storm. It was a short jump to a working understanding what the term refugee means. Students then watched a ten-minute film from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) in which young people told their own stories describing what their lives were like and why they had to leave their home.<sup>2</sup> The instructor elicited responses to the film: what surprised them; what were people chose to take with them; why did it sometimes take months for a family to arrive at a refugee camp, and so on. When the instructor said that the refugees from Sudan weren't able to take anything with them, one of the students responded, "they took their memories."

The next part of the lesson focused on the UN definition of refugee and why the UNHCR was established in 1950. Guiding questions encouraged students to draw connections between this new information and what they knew about World War II. Students analyzed the number and national origin of displaced people following WWII as compared to current figures. They were asked to make observations about what they noticed, talking first with a partner and then reporting out to the class. The instructor provided statistics on the number of refugees the United States accepted as compared to other countries. Because the class had moved on to a study of Vietnam, statistics included the number of people who fled Vietnam as the United States withdrew from the war. Students were also shown three video clips: The first of a person telling of their journey from Vietnam to the United States and starting a new life here; the second was of a group of U.S. veterans talking about why they set up an organization to support Vietnamese refugees; and, the third was about small businesses started by people who entered the United States under refugee status. Time didn't allow for a discussion of the videos.

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<sup>2</sup> To Be a Refugee, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpwqK3B2ac8>

At the end of the class, students responded in writing to the question: “Should we, as a country, continue to help people fleeing harm? Should we offer them a safe place, a refuge? Why or why not?” Here are some of the responses:

Student 1: We, as a country should continue to help people fleeing harm. We should offer them a safe place, a refuge. The reason that we should continue to help these people is this. These people are not causing us any pain, they are simply trying to make the best decisions for themselves and their family. I am sure that if this came the other way around they would care for us. Who are we to stand in their way of trying to live their lives as safe as possible?

Student 2: I think we should. What if you were a refugee? Would you want to be turned away from everywhere you went? Our ancestors were immigrants and refugees. If we don’t let refugees come to our country, wouldn’t that be like turning away our ancestors? I think we should still provide shelter for refugees and immigrants.

Student 3: We should continue to help people fleeing harm. We should offer them a safe place and/or a refuge. I say this because there are so many people fleeing and if we didn’t help them, we would look selfish and they might die.

Student 4: Yes, because they should be able to trust us and when we need them we should be able to trust them and if they can do something to help us.

Student responses are eloquent and in sharp contrast to the responses during the deliberative dialogue. It almost seems to be a different group of young people. Students are clearly grappling with the moral issues, as well as the political issues. There was a sympathetic tone to the situation of refugees in the majority of the responses. It is clear that the families who

were seeking shelter, fleeing from danger had become people within their moral community or community of shared fate.

What changed? The lesson included information and statistics that students were asked to analyze by drawing comparisons and making connections. Students talked with a partner about observations before speaking out to the class as a whole. This broke the kind of mob rule that had prevailed in the previous discussions. The lesson included personal narratives. In this case, young people close to the same age told about their experience having to leave home. The film was a series of interviews and didn't contain images of war. Listening to people talking about their experience put a human face on an abstract issue. That person was no longer a threat, but someone in a difficult situation they might be able to help. There was a clear sense of moral reciprocity expressed in the student reflections. Lastly, listening to multiple voices was supported by the structure of the lesson.

More time still would have been advantageous. Students might have researched specific situations and followed up the short vignettes that were shared on Vietnamese refugees by looking at what those who came as refugees were doing in their lives now. Students might have studied statistics on businesses, community leadership, and contributions to civic society, both within the state and region, as well as nationally. There was not time to discuss the film clips on advocacy for refugees and the commitments that led people to engage in advocacy activities.

In the student reflections at the end of the class period, there is evidence that students are thinking in terms that would support legitimacy. Students are justifying their thought about action, even though they are not engaging in action or advocacy themselves. The impact of this guided interactive lesson on refugees could be seen in the immigration policies that students wrote for the island countries that they finished in the last week of the school year.

### **Island Countries**

At the end of the school year, students completed detailed drawings of island countries as a summative assessment on forms of government,

alliances and treaties. Because of our focus on immigration, students were also asked to write up their country's policy on immigration, including those with refugee status and other kinds of visas and those without documentation. Eighteen of the island countries had some kind of policy for documented immigrants; seven of these policies focused on work visas. Five countries didn't accept immigrants, except those who had refugee status. Six students had some kind of policy for working with undocumented immigrants to obtain legal status; eleven island countries turned back undocumented immigrants or deported them, while six students had policies that were clearly in violation of international human rights covenants. These policies included: shoot to kill; use them as target practice for the military; firing range; shoot them, they have no right to be here; put them in slavery.

On the other hand, students were writing complex and nuanced policies for people with refugee status seeking admittance to the country. This is in stark contrast to the take a stand exercise in which only one student believed that the United States should help people fleeing from danger. All twenty-three students had some kind of policy for refugee visas. Some policies included quota numbers or confinement to certain areas and other policies were completely open. Unfortunately, there was not time to discuss the policies or compare them to actual national policies and consider the implications of various policies. What accounts for the difference in attitude toward immigrants with refugee status and those who come to the United States without documentation? It is the difference in the two lessons: Following the lesson focused on people fleeing the danger of persecution, students began to see themselves as members of a single moral and political international community as well as members of national and local communities (Golmohamad, 2009). They understood something about the situation of those with refugee status. There were not any conversations about the situation of those who enter the United States without documentation, and they were still a target of violent language.



## **Inventing Forms and Strategies of Civility**

This case study is a part of broader study on moral conversations, broadly defined. As noted earlier, there were few moral conversations of any kind in the six-month observation of an eighth grade social studies class. Human rights were not included in the textbook and I am not aware of any time human rights were explicitly discussed beyond the introduction to the idea of refugee status. Although the topic of immigration was clearly of interest to the students, it was not supported by the curriculum or state standards for eighth grade, nor is the teaching of human rights beyond a very brief coverage of the events following World War II. The series of conversations I've described were outside of the mandated curriculum, squeezed into available time. And yet, these kinds of curricular responses are vital to inventing concrete forms and strategies of civility. Covering the textbook will not do it.

I proposed civility, undergirded by the recognition of human rights, as a hopeful and powerful response to violence. I make the bold claim that we can create concrete forms of civility in local and global communities, including middle school classrooms. Balibar doesn't specifically address education; his concern is how nation-states and institutions can respond in this era of global violence with emancipatory practices. As a part of this, Balibar is concerned with the access of migrants and refugees to human rights when they are stateless. An important question, for Van Gunsteren and Balibar, is "permanent access to rather than simply entitlement to citizenship, and therefore humanity" (Balibar, 2001, p. 28). His conception of shared fate is rooted here, in the conviction that there must be a place for every person to belong.

I turned to Williams' conception of citizenship education as shared fate to consider what the idea of shared fate might look like in schools. I support Williams' proposal for citizenship education that includes "telling (true) stories about how we came to be connected to particular other human beings, and believing that we are responsible for constructing that connection in a manner that is justifiable to them" (Williams, 2003, p. 229).

However, as my case study illustrates, this is tricky. We need to see those particular other human beings as a part of our moral community.

Williams proposes that like citizenship education for shared identity, citizenship education for shared fate would include learning basic skills of critical reasoning, speech and argument, as well as building an awareness of public affairs. Additionally, citizenship education for shared fate would include developing the capacity of enlarged thought, the imaginative capacity to see oneself as bound up with others through relations of interdependence as well as through shared history and institutions, and the capacity to reshape the shared practices and institutions that shape one's environment through direct participation (Williams, 2003, pp. 238-239). I argue that these capacities must rest on an understanding and acceptance of human rights – or most importantly, the right to have rights. This is notably missing from Williams' proposal. These capacities also require an understanding and knowledge of diverse others, such knowledge must include narratives of concrete other's lives and situations in their own words. Not only as an imaginative capacity, but as empathy for and connection to concrete people who may be "strangers." This requires cultivating a 'critical sentimental education' in human rights education - a widening of our shared moral identity so that it is more inclusive (Zembylas, 2017). In this way, students and educators can begin to develop and support concrete forms and strategies of civility.

Returning to Bajaj's (2011) schema of human rights education based on ideologies - global citizenship, co-existence, and transformative action – it is clear that Williams' conception of shared fate falls in the model of co-existence. Education that supports the possibility of civility in Balibar's terms, must also include the models of education for global citizenship and sometimes aim at transformative action. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire stated "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention: through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 1970, p. 53). It is through such inquiry that we can find ways to address violence and work for social justice.

## **Conclusion**

I have explored forms of civility and shared fate as a response to violence in the context of an eighth grade classroom. I drew on Balibar's robust conception of civility because of the normative element that it contains: civility must entail the recognition of human rights. If we agree that this kind of civility is vital in our lives together, then we must make changes to school curricula, which focus more on coverage than on looking deeply at issues of concern to students and our current world. Further, the analysis of this case study suggests that educators at all levels need to do much more to be prepared to follow students' lead and take up difficult topics in the classroom. Civility requires that we do not close down such conversations.

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