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Teaching under Fire[1]

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I was driving through the Tel-Aviv rush hour for a civic studies class at the second chance school where I taught for the past few years. I liked to use the drive time to go over the lesson plan in my mind, to recall the last class, and to change gears from my own morning rush to a more focused teaching state of mind. My students were disaffected teenagers with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities, and with a lot going on in their personal lives. I was always challenged to find a balance between responding to their emotional and behavioral needs, and supporting their academic success.

I turned on the radio to listen to the morning news, hoping to hear about political events I could use as examples in the unit about the three branches of government I was planning to begin that day. Keeping my students updated about the news was a tool I found helpful in getting them engaged in the curriculum, and hopefully also encouraging them to expand their interests to the society around them, which they will soon serve as soldiers.

The morning news, however, had other matters to offer. The familiar unnerving mixture of wailing sirens, anchormen scrambling for information, and reporters' hurried, stressed voices communicated the news at once: terror has struck again. I left the radio on to hear the general details: where, when, how many. The first item on the list of concerns of the terror-savvy was off today – no immediate relatives had any reason to be where the attack occurred, on a bus in southern Tel-Aviv, and therefore no reason to call and jam the overburdened phone lines. I tuned off to go back to thinking about my class. Teaching on such mornings was always a hard task. The first time I had to teach on a morning when a bus was bombed not far from the school, killing and injuring scores, I took some time off to discuss the news, our feelings about what happened, our concerns. The second time that happened, we talked about the politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, about its history and contemporary expressions, about the occupied territories and the possibility of peace. The students shared their views, and together we considered the limits of a political argument – what is a legitimate political perspective, and when does it turn into hate speech that has no place in a political debate, even in times of great anxiety and anger. The third time we agreed that we cannot disrupt our schedule any more with discussions that extend outside our curriculum, as the final exams were getting near, and we had a lot of material to cover, some of which could not be bent to fit into a discussion about terror and politics. We talked briefly about how important it is to maintain a normal life even under conditions of terrorism, and we expressed our commitment to persevere by going about the business of studying toward the exam.

And here I was again, driving to work slowly in the far right lane to let the ambulances hurry by, to let buses pass me in a safe distance, wondering what I could tell my students that would give political and civic meaning to the unfolding events.

Civic education, democratic principles, peace and war are tangled together in many ways. When we teach our children to be citizens, we inform them of processes and practices in which they can and should engage; we inform them of the relations they are to have with their state through its proper institutions; we teach them what they can expect of their country, and what it can expect from them. We may discuss the importance of law abiding, or talk about the use of taxes; we may bring up voting and the impact it can have; sometimes we talk about how we can

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legitimately oppose decisions and practices we disapprove of. When we discuss with our children and students matters of nationality, we may raise matters relating to values, character or history; we may try to figure out with them what it is that sets us apart as a nation, and what binds us together as a nation. The practices, history and values that inform our identity as citizens incorporate our commitments as democratic citizens, and our national affiliations as democratic citizens of this particular nation. The circumstances of war exacerbate some of these connections, and distort others. Thinking of the nation as being threatened shifts the balance among these aspects of citizenship, and consequently, the different components of civic education change focus. Children learn to conceptualize war before they learn peace, even in peaceful eras and regions. When a democracy is attacked on its own soil, when its citizens are imperiled by a threat of terrorism, or when it enters a protracted period of conflict, many of the basic assumptions upon which its social order is constructed are distorted. Political allegiances shift. Civic freedoms, long held as guaranteed, are suddenly limited through a hasty appeal to security needs. Social practices and personal priorities are revised.

"More than a half century of empirical research...points to the consistent and overwhelming influence of education on myriad facets of democratic citizenship" (Nie and Hylligus 2001, 30).[2] Most of the empirical research on education maintains the approach that 'the more, the better' – namely, the more education attainment, the more civic engagement and political participation can be traced, both individually and statistically. These findings are supported with a further conclusion – not only any educational attainment would do, but specifically an education that involves a social civic curriculum, an education that emphasizes verbal skills and supports public-mindedness, increases the likelihood of a student's participation in the many aspects of the political life.(Galston 2003). Many studies point to the fact that more civic education means better civic outcomes, when those outcomes are measured in civic knowledge, skills and behavior (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Civic participation and engagement are imperative for the legitimacy of democracy; creating citizens who are civic-minded is thus a vital role of public education. When democratic stability is threatened by external perils such as terror attacks and conflict, and by the correlating internal responses such as suspension of rights and the narrowing public agenda, civic education becomes an even more crucial factor for the preservation of a stable democracy. In wartime, societies experience a surge in political interest as manifested in news consumption, political knowledge and willingness to participate in protests, or rallies, spurred by a sense of renewed patriotism and commitment to the public good. This public interest in the political sphere, however, does not always work to strengthen democratic commitments, for the participation takes the form of belligerent citizenship which reinforces national identification rather than demonstrating broader democratic interests. Hence the increase in civic participation may be considered good news to those who, following Putnam, are concerned with the decline in civic engagement. However, the forms of participation – and the types of commitments that this participation seems to express and reinforce – leave much to be desired, particularly in times when patriotism does not always coincide with a commitment to democracy. The balance among citizenship, democratic affiliation and nationality is distorted by the effects of war.

In times of war, the boundaries of the political are redrawn. The conceptualization of citizenship is reformulated, and the relations between individual and state change their contents to express different expectations. The education system, with its teachers, administrators and other stakeholders representing the widest range of social actors, cannot evade this fate. As a public institution responsible for preparing future generations to becoming active members of society, schools are bound to undergo change during conflict.

I think about the social processes generated by the sense of vulnerability that conflict produces as a form of 'belligerent citizenship.' The multidimensional conception of citizenship loses much of its thickness in times of conflict and security threats, and individuals' multiple affiliations to various aspects of society shrink to fit the proclamation 'We are all fellow-nationals.' The push toward national unity, support for the troops, manifestations of patriotism and suppression of dissent is evident in many public and private venues. This conceptualization of citizenship assumes the state to be responsible first and foremost for protecting individuals' lives from the dangers and, as Hobbes suggested, help them avert the danger of violent death. The expectations of citizens from their government in times of war narrow down to resemble basic chivalry relations, in which the government can expect much of its citizens in exchange to protecting their safety. In a different sense these narrow relations are a reflection of the Maslow hierarchy of needs, where if one's physiological needs and safety needs (including expectations of survival) are in danger, the urgent requirement to address those trumps all other needs. In war this focus creates a narrower notion of individual-state relations.

A second distinctive feature of belligerent citizenship is an overpowering form of patriotic unity. A

sense of solidarity, unity and a common cause are regarded by political psychologists as part of the required attitudes for enduring an intractable conflict. "The purpose of beliefs of unity is to provide a sense that all members of the society support the goals of the conflict and their leaders. They act to strengthen the solidarity and stability...a lack of unity, on the other hand, creates polarization and internal tensions that hamper the struggle with the enemy." (Bar-Tal 1996, 24)

The third distinct characteristic of citizenship in wartime is the way in which deliberation is perceived. Deliberation is far less encouraged in a state of war than in other times, or than what democratic models aspire for. Deliberation and disagreement are widely regarded as threats to the security effort, and the more the security threat becomes real and pressing, the narrower are the limits of the acceptable in public discussions. In situations of a protracted conflict, the public agenda tends to be focused around security issues, and a vast range of opinions is deemed unreasonable or irrelevant. Hence there are very few subjects that are perceived as worthy of public discussion, and very few perspectives that are regarded as adequate.

How does the education system respond to these aspects of belligerent citizenship?
The common response in the Israeli education system is to reflect uncritically the alleged national solidarity, and to teach the belligerent form of citizenship through the history and civic studies curricula, the celebration of holidays, and many other methods. Many, though not all, of the responses in the American public sphere and public education system point to the same direction. The espousal of belligerent citizenship by the public schooling system is perilous, for it impedes democratic justice, as well as replicating the circumstances of conflict. Let us take a look at alternative ways in which the public education system should address the social circumstances of war.

Educational research and theory should look into public education's tendency to reflect and replicate the social responses to war. Allowing for belligerent forms of citizenship, including narrow conceptualizations of patriotism, to dominate the host of ways in which public schools manifest and inculcate citizenship creates many dangers. Two of the most challenging consequences of this tendency are intolerance, and the lack of vision regarding society's future. I suggest that the proper response of the public education system to the social circumstances of wartime should be designed to balance the demands of belligerent citizenship with an ongoing commitment to democratic principles. In other words, my concern is not with the mere forms of belligerent citizenship, with its exclusive social unity and strengthening national sentiments. These, I suggest (following political–psychological evidence) are natural or common responses to a sense of threat. Rather it is the lack of public discourse on these changes and challenges, the non-deliberative espousal by many citizens and institutions of the demands of belligerent citizenship that is the focus of my concern. Such shifts in our understanding, and consequently in the ways we teach, citizenship stand the risk of generating and sustaining undemocratic perspectives, particularly when pursued uncritically. Many agree that a main justification of publicly funded education is the ability of such system to cultivate attitudes and skills necessary for the preservation of democracy. Since the circumstances of national conflict, along with their social consequences, imperil democracy in many ways, it is public educators' role to encourage democracy in the face of these threats.

How should this challenge be met? My answer is based on the principles of democratic education, amended to reflect and respond to the concerns which wartime generates in a democratic public. The responses are aimed at incorporating the claims of belligerent citizenship into the democratic model of civic education. The challenge we face, as citizens and educators, is that of balancing the urgent demands of belligerent citizenship with the ongoing requirements of a democratic civic commitment. One of the main challenges to this balancing act is the reconfigured form of solidarity, and the sense of unity with fellow-nationals which seems to be based on the exclusion of various groups from the public discourse, based on the ethnicity, religion of ideological and political commitments. What are the proper relations between democratic education and patriotism? Patriotism, Gutmann (1999, 312) reminds us, "is a sentiment rather than a moral perspective." To properly respond to this sentiment in the context of education, theorists should not (and usually do not) defend it in its basic expression of "my country, right or wrong." This would create a risk of uncritical acceptance of wrongful actions by the state. "A democratic education opposes this kind of patriotism when it encourages students to think about their collective lives in morally principled terms," and when "its curriculum encourages students to think critically, in moral terms" (Gutmann, 2002, 49). It is clear, therefore, that for Gutmann a democratic education is not dependant entirely on social consensus. Rather it is derived from democratic principles and commitments, which provide the justification, the basis, and the moral limits for educational practices. Patriotism as an educational aim cannot evade these basic moral boundaries, and at its best it should offer ways of interpreting and manifesting them.

When democracy is widely endorsed in society, the teaching of patriotism can easily be achieved in compliance with democratic principles. However, democracy diminishes at war, and emerging forms of oppressive patriotism threaten to substitute basic democratic principles as guidelines for civic education. In some cases teachers and school boards – along with other citizens – espouse exclusive or jingoistic forms of patriotic teachings and expressions, with little regard to the damage those do to the civic self-image of students. Is this necessarily a negative possibility? What if belligerent patriotic unity is what most parents want for their children, and the majority, or the mainstream of society expects the education system to cultivate this notion of patriotism? Democratic education reminds us that the expectation of parents and communities cannot replace the public education system's commitment to basic democratic principles. Uncritical patriotic education stands the risk of promoting parochialism and injustice. In her response to multicultural critiques of democratic education, Gutmann (1999) supports a politics of recognition that is "based on respect for individuals and their equal rights as citizens," as well as curricular recognition of cultures, and tolerance of diverse perspectives on moral and religious issues (309). This normative description is embedded in social circumstances in which the public agenda is vast enough to accommodate a variety of issues, therefore creating the need to educate citizens to tolerate differing standpoints. Similarly, Macedo maintains that support for tolerance, which he describes as a basic civic value, can and should be achieved through exposure to diversity, even at the cost of having to impose such exposure on opponents of "bedrock political values" (Macedo, 1995, 485). Gutmann emphasizes that democratic education grants citizens discretion over how to interpret the demand of civic education, but for her, too, this discretion cannot supersede the basic principles of democracy. When parents oppose to teaching their children a democratic, civic curricula, they "do not have a general right to override otherwise legitimate democratic decisions concerning the schooling of their children" (Gutmann, 1999, 294).

It is therefore the school's commitment to democracy that takes precedence over any demand made by specific parents or groups — and, I would add, even by the social majority or mainstream — regarding the civic education of children. In the social circumstances of wartime, the public education system may need to impose exposure to diversity, along with the cultivation of other basic democratic values, not only on small radical groups but on a growing part of mainstream society as well. The justifications Macedo and Gutmann offer for imposing "bedrock political values" or "basic democratic principles" on marginal groups in a democratic society apply also to circumstances when these values are questioned or rejected by the mainstream. Based on the claim that democratic principles should apply to all citizens, and therefore can justifiably be imposed on those who would prefer not to expose their children to them, we can begin to construct a normative educational response to belligerent citizenship.

The public education system should be committed to the principles of democracy, not to majority rule or parental authority; therefore it should continue to exercise its commitment to democracy through opposing belligerent citizenship's undemocratic messages. Essentially, the type of unity that is associated with belligerent citizenship is inimical to democratic deliberation, to critical thought, and to the possibility of tolerance and inclusion. A thin but resilient blanket of solidarity is suppressing the social reality of diversity and pluralism, to which many educational scholars devote much of their attention in writing about civic education. The public agenda is narrowed down and easily gets overwhelmed by discussions related to conflict; certain religious, cultural and ideological perspectives are deemed threats to national security. What follows is an exclusion of various groups, and a growing threat of political stagnation.

At the same time, education is a public endeavor, and responsiveness to public perceptions of citizenship and nationality is inherent in both the education system's structure and in its core mission. Rejecting belligerent citizenship's undemocratic messages thus does not mean negating its centrality in the public opinion, or its vitality for individuals and groups within the nation. The public education system by nature reflects common trends in the public discourse and sentiment; advocating the rejection of these is unfeasible – because of the representative composure of the education system; it is also undesirable in that it carries a paternalistic notion of teaching what is supposedly 'good for the public' rather than what the majority perceives as a public good. A reinterpretation of the aims of democratic education, focused on accommodating the needs of wartime and balancing them with the widely acknowledged aims of civic education, can potentially offer the most relevant response to this tension. In other words, the focus of liberal theorists on civic equality, educational diversity and tolerance is crucial in the context of war. Nonetheless, the presiding interpretation of these aims may be too weak when the social circumstances are not hospitable for substantive democracy, including ideological diversity and respect for diverse 'others.' To keep its commitment to democratic principles, public education should foster critical notions of civic education and encourage educators to be committed to democratic principles rather than to majority perspectives alone.

Democratic education's emphasis on civic equality, recognition of differences, and reciprocity

beyond borders gain more relevance when democracy is threatened. But in times of conflict, with the conflicting demands of democratic education and belligerent citizenship, the educational tools should best be updated to strengthen the possibility of strong civic education to flourish in public schools. In other words, while public educators should continue to endorse principles of democratic education in times of war, possibly more adamantly than in other times, they should diversify the tools they use and the approaches they consider in constructing and presenting the civic world to the students. This diverse approach could enable the emergence of new forms of diversity, giving voice to subgroups oppressed by the social circumstances of war, and allow students, teachers and the wider public to envision a different political future.

How should the aims of democratic education be interpreted in the context of war? How is the education system to foster and promote democratic values, attitudes and skills in the face not of diversity or even intolerance, but of paralyzing, patriotic unity of opinion, which is widely regarded as essential to national survival? It is hard to assume that recognition and tolerance will be as readily cultivated in the classroom. They still remain desirable, even urgently needed attitudes; but they might not suffice. As Giroux reminds us, it is the role of educators to "provide spaces of resistance within the public schools…while simultaneously providing the knowledge and skills that enlarge their sense of the social and their possibilities as viable agents capable of expanding and deepening democratic public life" (Giroux, 2002, 1155). To fulfill the liberal demand for civic equality, educators should create spaces of resistance in public schools, actively supporting the expression of a variety of standpoints, rather than plainly responding to their implied existence in the public and educational arenas. This pedagogic strategy could prove an effective practice of manifesting the students' civic equality. It would demonstrate a resistance to the exclusion of individuals and groups by the security-dominated, solidarity-oriented public sphere. The demand for civic equality and tolerance requires educators to oppose the social tendency to narrow the borders of the public agenda. Part of what enables the perpetuation of belligerent unity is the reduction of the public agenda to questions of security, which are expected to be solved by military and administrative professionals. Here too the role of teachers is to resist the attenuation of the public sphere and the public agenda by creating a zone of vivid democratic life within the classroom. By making room for a multiplicity of perspectives on a variety of questions, and giving voice to those whose perspectives and interests are being silenced by the overpowering claims of national security. In such times there is great urgency "to inculcate the values necessary for the perpetuation of democratic institutions" (McConnel, 2003, 87) which is a constant expectation of the public education system; however, in times of conflict this task has to be performed in opposition to the social tide. When justice is narrowly conceived of in conflictual terms, when society accepts polarized visions of humanity and inhumanity as justifications for war, the pursuit of democratic justice must be consciously undertaken. The threat that society and public education face in times of war is not solely that of intolerance, but also the lack of vision of the future. When my young students were faced with the fear and uncertainty of life under a constant threat of terror, their conceptions of civic membership and democratic affiliation needed revising, strengthening and broadening. Educators should structure their classes as forums for public deliberation, encouraging both a diversity of issues and a diversity of voices, to resist the tyranny of the monolithic public sphere. To envision a different future, different questions must be asked, and differing answers should be tolerated to the largest extent possible. Envisioning a future of peace entails questioning the basic assumptions of war as well as the social acceptance of these assumptions. It entails the development of critical thought that is limited only by the broadest and most basic democratic political values, rather than by the contingencies of public opinion.

Going into my classroom in the morning when terror hit Tel-Aviv again, as it did many other cities and countries since then, I let my students talk briefly about their own experiences that morning, reminded them to inform their families of their whereabouts, and moved on to my initial discussion of the three branches of government. I began by discussing the importance of checks and balances, and the utmost role of civic society as an overseer of the actions of its government. Encouraging my students to express their (mostly grim) views of the governing institutions, I tried to weave into our classroom discussion an awareness of what it means to be a citizen, what it means to be governed and represented, and what it is that we as active, engaged participants in the ongoing construction of our society can do to contribute to the discourse that envisions this society as it is, and as it should be.

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[1] This article is a reworked version of Ben-Porath, S. (2003). Radicalizing democratic education: Unity and dissent in wartime (*Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2003).* The argument I offer here appears in expanded form in *Citizenship under Fire: Democratic Education in Times of Conflict* (Princeton University Press 2006).

[2] It is important to note that while these studies measure in various ways the marked effectiveness of civic education, the standards movement and in particular No Child Left Behind are pushing schools away from civic studies. Thus despite evidence to the direct contribution of civic education to civic engagement and participation, civic studies today in many states in the U.S. are confined to one course in 12th grade, if at all.

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