

The role of individual negation in enabling social capital, moral education, and citizenship education

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Abstract

Social capital, moral education, and citizenship education are three big ideas fundamental to the health of any democratic state. Yet exactly what these terms mean is a source of much contention and divergent thinking. Bringing some clarity to the three might help the cause of bolstering their prominence in educational discourse and reform. Therefore, in this essay I explore the underlying form of social capital, moral education, and citizenship education, which I characterize as “the negation of the individual.”

Demands for effective citizenship and moral education, and the ultimate building of social capital, abound. One of the most important and troubling of all human tasks (and hence a challenge of educators) is to be able to know what it means to live the virtuous life (Purpel, 1991, 309), which includes arriving at an ethical theory that is both teachable and inherent in all curricula. Although the inclusion of a wide-variety of subject matter into the school day has resulted in a scarcity of time for moral education, Dewey suggested “if other studies do not correlate well with this one, so much the worse for them—they are the ones to give way, not it” (1893, 60). Dewey was not merely suggesting the centrality of ethics instruction for the school day, but rather an interpenetration of perspectives of the world in which we are all members. The teaching of ethics in this way ranked higher in importance to Dewey than any other subject for “the subject-matter of ethics must furnish the measure of others studies and not *vice versa*” (1893, 61). Central to a successful moral citizenship education is, as Dewey noted, the fashioning of individuals into a group, which implies the value and necessity of sociomoral experiences (Osterman, 2000).

Our ability to foster social capital, within schools and beyond, depends upon many of the same requirements necessary for successful moral citizenship education. Social capital is fundamentally based on the engagement of individuals, which is often promoted through the development of selfless, altruistic, reciprocal, and trusting behaviors. Because the school is an institution erected by society to maintain and advance the welfare of society, we must ensure that the social aim remains in focus (Dewey, 1909, 7). As with moral and citizenship education, social capital is fundamentally based on the negation of the individual.

One problem that jeopardizes our educational goals is nascent extreme individualism, cynicism, and narcissism within our society. For example, our communities overwhelmingly believe individuals are less honest and moral than a generation ago and far too prevalent are institutions that enable individualism and competitive spirits, rather than finding commonalities and collaboration (Osterman, 324). Teachers are cognizant and concerned with this growing self-interest (Kohn, 1997, 433) thereby highlighting the need for a paradigmatic change in our society, one that would re-emphasize a common vision. Within this context, the focus of schooling should not be the present one of competition, content mastery, individualism, and success, but rather one of cooperation, common goals, harmony and temperance (Purpel, 1991). In short, we need to allow for students to recognize that they are individuals *within* society, which necessitates the recognition of each individual’s social relations and responsibilities involved in conjoint life (Dewey, 1909).

The Negation of the Individual

The common thread of social capital, moral education, and citizenship education is the negation of the individual. What is meant by “negation” is not a pejorative concept, but is rather a state of being where one realizes the interconnectedness of all individuals and their mutuality. This negation is fundamental to the necessary altruism, trust,

and reciprocity that enable social capital, reflective morality, and the enlightened and responsible dispositions requisite for citizenship education.

The eminent Japanese ethicist, Watsuji Tetsuro, based his seminal ethics text, *Rinrigaku*, on the premise that ethics is the “order or the pattern of thought which the communal existence of human beings is rendered possible . . . ethics consists of the laws of social existence” (1937, 11). Much of Tetsuro’s work focused on the essence of existence as not being an individual, nor a complete part of society, but rather “in between.” It is the *between* that suggests the necessary negation of the individual.

The Japanese term *ningen* (individual) is a term of great significance for social capital, moral education, and citizenship education, because it denotes this negation and is suggestive of the irrevocable unity of the individual and society. The notion of an isolated individual who is predominately concerned with their own tastes and pursuits is a spurious one, suggests Tetsuro, because an individual only exists as part and parcel of the structure of the past, present, and future. An occidental orientation typically divides the world into an object/subject duality, but Tetsuro suggests that in order to attain self knowledge and realization we need to step out of ourselves and recognize our connection to others (Carter, 1996, 334).

The idea of individual negation corresponds with the thinking found in the Progressive Era, whereby the self was considered something always in the state of becoming, never final or fixed (Dewey, 1932). For example, Dewey (1916) recognized that “the individual in his isolation is nothing” (94) and sought to further the “interest in community welfare” (Dewey, 1909, 17) among students by realizing the illusory conception of the self. This is a central tenet of sociomoral education and Dewey’s conception of reflective morality.

The inability of the self to “abstract itself from the particular social role . . . so as to reflect upon itself as an individual *qua* individual, rather than *qua* family member or member of this or that social group” (Tetsuro, 347) is therefore a daunting challenge for educators. The Japanese conception of the self as incomplete apart from society suggests that “true morality is the forgetting of the self” (332) and the awareness and connection with all, which corresponds with the desired state of affairs for social capital, moral education, and citizenship education.

Social Capital

The nebulous nature of social capital undermines attempts to recognize its underlying form of individual negation. At its inception, the term ‘social capital’ and defined it as “a byproduct of a wide variety of social relations; it inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons” (Wallis, Crocker, and Schechter, 1998, 256). The Committee for Economic Development (CED) indicated that information sharing, reciprocity, values and norms that maintain social order are features that define social capital (259). Putnam further outlined the method of attaining and describing social capital and clarified the core idea as the “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, 19). Putnam extended his definition by emphasizing that social networks have *value* and contain elements of engagement, volunteerism, friendships, trust, and community life. In short, social capital is about the experiences that build connections (Wallis, 1998, 327-8). Common to these definitions is the interrelatedness of individuals predicated on their ability to reach out from the self.

Perhaps the greatest detriment to social capital is the selfishness of extreme individualism. Selfish approaches to society are not necessarily wrong, for they further our goals and enhance our happiness. Rather self-interest is problematic when we fail to consider the rights and claims of others. The kind of selflessness we need to explore sprouts from the negation of the individual and the awareness that consequences of actions necessarily involve others, as well as the realization of mutual inclusiveness. Tetsuro suggested that the way in which we teach selflessness, benevolence, and compassion is through the unity of the individual and society.

Altruism and reciprocity also represent fundamental tenets of social capital. As with selflessness, the negation of the individual underscores the development of altruistic and reciprocal actions. Altruism is not only an important indicator of social capital but also of civic duty. One way of availing oneself of altruistic behavior seems to be organizational involvement and building smaller communities, where there is less alienation, anomie, and anonymity, and where a purely individual existence is an untenable proposition through more social points of contact. What happens in small environments, where altruistic acts are more visible and reciprocity easily facilitated, is a willingness

to intervene and involve oneself in communal betterment. Reciprocity is not only the foundation of social capital, but also for citizenship education. Reciprocity enables participation and engagement in a democracy and the “willingness of opposing sides in a democratic debate to agree on the ground rules for seeking mutual accommodation after sufficient discussion” (Putnam, 340). One can only come to know what their own good is when they contrast it with the good of others (Osterman, 350), and it is the business of public schools to begin to build these social and reciprocal relationships.

Trust represents yet another core feature of social capital. Trust not only lubricates social life, but it is necessary for bridging and bonding people and groups. The benefits of trust include increased volunteerism, philanthropy, engagement in community affairs, honesty, and tolerance. These benefits, in turn, perpetuate further trust that reinforces other attributes of social capital and citizenship. Trust suggests that “our fates are linked” (Putnam, 288) and it demands of us to widen our lens and the universe of obligation beyond the self.

Social capital represents one resultant benefit of the negation of the individual. If we fail to participate in public life, suggests Mill, one “never thinks of any collective interest, of any objects to be pursued jointly with others but only in competition with them, and in some measure at their expense...” (Putnam, 337). It is the charge of public education to respond to this need and create more opportunities for connection among diverse student bodies, and more participation in every avenue of life. By opening the curriculum to political, economic, and social questions that facilitate a communitarian connective tissue we can bring into relief the benefits of negating the self. This would help buoy and enhance social capital, which requires looking beyond ourselves.

Moral Education

Unlike fostering social capital, moral education has become a contentious and politically charged element of education. Although the underlying form of moral education is similar to that of social capital, that of the necessary negation of the individual, other intervening variables make it more polemical.

One reason for the decline in moral education and its expurgation from the classroom is that many new teachers do not believe that they have a right to broach moral issues (Lasley and Biddle, 158). If we consider Dewey’s definition of that which is moral in light of the unwillingness to teach morality, it is clear that the social nature of schooling is marginalized. Dewey suggested that “all education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral,” (1916, 360) a statement that resonates with Tetsuro and brings into sharp relief the immense scope of morality in the school. Ethics and morality are at the heart of the normative purpose of the school for they concern the problems that “arise between persons, as individuals, and as members of society” (Tetsuro, 1937, 341).

Avoiding moral education is not a new phenomenon. In 1893, Dewey remarked that while an impetus and general push for moral education existed, experts expressed a desire to avoid teaching it. Although today many have turned to safe and popular moral platitudes and inculcative methods, these are rarely efficacious. Teaching rules and distinctions do not further the moral being and if the instruction is not authentic to the life of the student, it will simply fail to make character.

For Dewey, ethical theory consisted of the “typical features of every human interaction” (1893, 58) and a process of studying the “inner process as determined by the outer conditions or as changing these outer conditions” (1932, ix). Central to Dewey’s conception of moral education included the rights of others and how individual choices affected those rights. This conception, which is built on the negation of the individual, necessitates us “to regard oneself as one among others” (1932, 76). The contemporary development of a selfless orientation requires that we move beyond the morality of custom and enter into new contextual and reflective moral education.

Morality of custom, which is generally the program of character education programs that list virtues and vices, requires that we follow societal guidelines without thought or deliberation. When parents, teachers, and the government ultimately compel adherence to accepted ethical codes, they suggest blind acceptance without an occasion of doubt (or difficulty) and assume a linear progression that ignores ill structured questions of morality. If we rely on custom and tradition, we not only fail to progress, but fail to keep pace with new experiences that continually shape and alter our consciousness and values. Presciently, Dewey noted that the rise of machines, distant markets, mobility, migration, automobile, telephones and new leisure activities have “broken up local community bonds” (1932, 88). As a result, the morality of custom which once acted as a social adhesive and made individuals aware of their reciprocal relations, no

longer corresponds to modernity. The inculcation of unassailable customary morals works against the development of social capital, citizenship, and a relevant moral education. It is really a civic duty that “each generation, especially one living at a time like the present, is under the responsibility of overhauling its inherited stock of moral principles and reconsidering them in relation to contemporary conditions and needs,” (Dewey, 1932, 145) and to find what *works* given our societal changes.

Instead of acquiring habits and dispositions that are routine and settled, moral education need to reinvigorate moral discourse that responds to our current dynamic society and eschew that which no longer coheres to our experience (Purpel, 1991). By not examining morality from a critical angle, and accepting morals as fact and truth, we produce a situation that “is so exclusively individual an affair that it tends very naturally to pass into selfishness” (Dewey, 1900, 15). An alternative approach, which enables the negation of the individual, social capital, and bolsters citizenship education, is Dewey’s conception of reflective morality.

The method of reflective morality asks students to investigate inherited moral principles, but to also go beyond these and engage in discussions not relating to *what* to do, but *how to decide* what to do (Dewey, 1893). The initial mental construction of a moral issue requires a scene of human interaction and struggle with incompatible belief systems. Any ready-made conclusions contradict the nature of reflective morality, for while all principles are stores of information and possible solutions to problems, inquiry is essential in many cases of competing principles and cases of right vs. right (Dewey, 1932). In addition, reflective morality seeks to discover rational principles that are justified and coherent for future use. This is not to say that reflective morality is teleological, for while it does examine the *ends in view*, that is not the final criterion. By turning things over in our minds we detach ourselves from *our a priori* judgments and consider the connection of our actions to others. Reflective morality is thus in line with Tetsuro’s view that all ethical maxims are contextual and must be regarded “in the context of one’s social web of interconnectedness, in the betweenness between us, where we already exist as social beings...” (1937, 345).

Reflective morality enables teaching and developing socially conscious individuals, while contemporary character and values education programs are often anathema to building social capital and civic engagement. Although Dewey noted “it is commonplace to say that the development of character is the end of all school work” (1909, 49), his conception of character seeks to remove individualistic explorations of morality (1916, 98). With the recent emphasis on skills mastery, achievement, and standardization, and a desire for an ideology-free educational environment, character education’s platitudes and unassailable concepts have become the standard moral fare which fail to promote the negation of the individual.

One motivation for character education programs is the fear of individual relativism or nihilism, which is legitimate, but it is not a justification for removing reflection and selfless orientations. Rules, regulations, and virtues from teachers and parents are responses to these fears of moral ambiguity, but they are quite often rationalized only through superior positions of power and not ethical principle. Hegemonic didacticism by the few often results in morality being limited to “carrying out orders” and “identifying the ‘right’ with whatever passes without a scolding” (Dewey, 1932, 110). The idea of a “catalogue of different virtues commits us to the notion that virtues may be kept apart” (1932, 117) and this fixes attention to the “conformity with Rule A, Class I., Species 1, subhead (1), etc.,”(1932, 138) the effect of which is an uncomplicated pedestrian view of moral thought.

This brief exploration of reflective morality and character education is required in order to highlight the common features of moral education, social capital, and citizenship education. By appealing to the active nature of the student, and their ability to interrogate, reason, create, and construct, we have the opportunity to shift the moral foundations of schooling from absorption, which is selfish, to service and authentic consideration of our effect on others, which is social (Dewey, 1909). Moral instruction should widen the imagination relative to social relations and examine the ways in which men are bound and live together in the complex form of their relations and develop a “sympathetic imagination for human relations in action” (1893, 57). Dewey suggested that the youth of each generation must more and more realize the unity of the interest of all in anyone and the interpenetration of interests in a wide variety of actions, because the social and the moral are inextricably bound (Dewey, 1893).

Citizenship Education

Similar to moral education and social capital, citizenship education also rests upon a degree of individual

negation. Both moral education and citizenship education view a good citizen as one who is able to understand the nature of social life and carefully “calculate the social consequences of actions” (McClellan, 58). But with a waning social mindset, an increasingly expurgated curriculum, and declining civic engagement, we are at risk of alienating the normative experience and the central purpose of our schools.

The somewhat recent assertions that moral instruction is not part of the common school experience negatively impacted citizenship education. Even though citizenship education advertises rights and responsibilities of citizens, the tendency toward emphasizing rights rather than responsibilities, in addition to the unwillingness to form common values and unity in schools, has helped to bolster individualism. This neglect for commonality contains historical roots of interest that help us to understand what might be done to reverse this course.

Elementary schools of the nineteenth century were primarily institutions concerned with the morality of its future citizenry. The progressives updated this emphasis with an angle toward the democratic society and social obligations. The general education movement of the 1920’s and 1930’s focused on skills that would enable “lives of useful citizenship” (McClellan, 66) which served to place morality within the context of the common good. The 1940’s and 1950’s experienced a de-emphasis of the common good and a premium for academic skills and unwavering patriotism. Thus, the spirit of the Cold War appropriated citizenship and moral education and the subsequent reaction to “the system,” in the decades to follow, would concomitantly weaken citizenship and moral education. A growing emphasis on tolerance and individual rights, the fear of offending diverse viewpoints, and the avoidance of controversy, diminished the charge and influence of civic mindedness.

Modernity has also weakened moral and civic instruction through a shift away from the intersection of work and leisure in tightly knit communities. Modern societal and economic changes also gave rise to the emphasis of academically related knowledge and skills that benefit the individual. Teachers and administrators were more than happy to remove contentious moral education from the curriculum, which resulted in a deepening cultural divisiveness and separation. As a result, we lost our ability to find common ground and, in the process, “elevated cultural relativism to a primary social value” (McClellan, 75). This change is precisely at odds with the core of democratic citizenship which seeks to maintain a balance of individual interests and the common good.

Central to citizenship education is the ability to negate the individual self and to consider others in the context of our actions. It is absolutely essential that democratic citizens sublimate personal needs and serve the social good of the community, which need not conflict with the interests of the self (Lasley, 1987). It is in this spirit that we inquire into the best methods for allowing citizens the opportunity to engage in common and worthy purposes. Patterson and Chandler (2008) argue that the justice-oriented citizen, the highest level of the Westheimer and Kahne (2004) orientations, is the very type that is called for in the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994) standards, stating, “This citizen is not only well informed, as a personally responsible citizen might be, or simply active, as the participatory citizen might be, but active for the common good, acknowledging cultural diversity and interdependence in this citizenship role” (p. 4).

An array of techniques and methods exist for citizenship education to negate extreme individualism. Citizenship education must emphasize “whatever binds people together in cooperative human pursuits and results” (Dewey, 1916, 98) and attend to shared experiences. Shared experiences and undertakings provide an educational foundation for civic participation and a mindful awareness of our interconnectivity. Dewey noted that *engaging* in social life is the only way to *prepare* for social life (Dewey, 1909). The schism between knowledge in high school and actual engagement following high school points to a fundamental difficulty in application--we enter into the problems of societal reinforcement of the individual. Educators can respond with community based projects, interviews, and service whereby self-interest becomes pregnant with the interest in the betterment of others.

Implications

Dewey reminds us of Aristotle’s oft quoted epigram that suggests it is not enough for a man to be good; he must be good for something. The something which a man must be good for, said Dewey, is the capacity to live as a social member so that what he gets from living with others in on par with what he contributes (1916, 359). Our depleted stocks of social capital and academic myopia have positioned our society towards civic failure. Our social capital deficit “threatens educational performance, safe neighborhoods, equitable tax collection, democratic responsiveness, everyday honesty, and even our health and happiness” (Putnam, 367). It comes as no surprise that civically minded

institutions and individuals want to reverse this decline, but the seemingly enigmatic source of discontent and the lack of vigorous efforts on the part of the public have not lent to significant change in policy.

In order to return to active participation we need to revisit Dewey's conception of reflective morality and engage in what Tetsuro saw as true morality, the "forgetting of the self" and the "nondualistic merging of self and other" (1937, 332-334). Practical classroom suggestions for building social capital, moral education, and citizenship education by enhancing the negation of the self include:

- Focusing on successful systems (i.e. cooperatives) that rely on wholehearted, active participation
- Oral histories and interviews of community members on topics that highlight the life history and experience of the interviewee and their necessary interconnectivity with others
- Consistently confronting moral issues in the social studies and modeling an awareness and consideration of divergent and competing interests
- Creating smaller learning communities
- Complicating normative questions with multiple perspectives and the best available evidence
- Focusing on commonalities and responsibilities of community, national, and global citizens

Each of these suggestions attempts to position students to engage in widening and enlarging experiences. By attending to the negation of the individual, we can return to the purposes of public education and the charge of developing wholehearted, open-minded, and responsible citizens.

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