

## **Diversity, Mutual Respect, and the Education of a Deliberative Citizenry**

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Honored and daunted though I am at the prospect of responding to so rich a thinker as Amy Gutmann, I shall not take this as an occasion for eulogy. Her paper demands no less than our sharpest critical attention. The questions it poses are pressing not only for countries with a long if uneven history of democracy like the United States and France but also, and perhaps more so, for countries like South Africa newly embarked upon the project of building democracy.

Two questions drive Gutmann's paper. How can a multicultural society educate its members for democracy? And a multinational society? She properly regards the second question as a greater challenge to democratic education than the first. A country like South Africa, which might be described as both multicultural and multinational, adds extra bite to the challenge — a challenge that must give due weight to the legacies of apartheid. The question for concerned South African educationists and policy-makers is this: How is it possible to forge a democratic citizenry from an historically fragmented society in which a legally entrenched cultural separatism has served the ends of racial domination?

In this brief commentary I undertake two related tasks. One is to explore the role of mutual respect as an integrative, analytical and generative principle for democratic education; the other is to use some current issues in South African education to test some of Professor Gutmann's conclusions. In undertaking these two small tasks, I cannot do justice to the richness and complexity of her paper. This is why in my opening remarks I chose to say that the paper demands no less than our sharpest critical attention. I offer my comments as an invitation to further deliberation.

Notwithstanding the tension between cultural diversity and the project of civic unity, it is possible, Professor Gutmann argues, to integrate multicultural and civic educational aims in a principled combination that attends to the truths of each. Mutual respect is the integrative principle she proposes. I take it that she conceives of mutual respect as incorporating non-repression and non-discrimination, the pivotal principles in her widely celebrated book on democratic education.<sup>1</sup> In her paper, mutual respect is a versatile tool. Over and above its primary use as a principle for integrating the concern for a common citizenship with a proper acknowledgement of cultural diversity, the principle of mutual respect serves as a guideline both for the selection of curriculum content and for the selection of pedagogical styles appropriate to democratic education. It serves, too, as a principle of arbitration in conflicts about the display of cultural or religious difference. Finally, it serves to disqualify as candidates for democratic education, the two extreme positions of transcendental universalism and separatist particularism.

The adequate accomplishment of so many kinds of work requires a concept of mutual respect that is both robust and flexible. This is indeed what Professor Gutmann offers. Minimally defined, following the Oxford English Dictionary, mutual respect is "a proper regard for the dignity of person or position." On an elaborated definition it expresses "the equal standing of every person as an individual and a citizen" and it "enables democratic citizens to discuss their political differences in a productive way, first by understanding one another's perspectives and then by trying to find fair ways of resolving their disagreements." Mutual respect, on Gutmann's conception, is a core civic

virtue which comes in complete and incomplete versions. In its incomplete version, mutual respect rests only on the recognition of diversity; for completion as a civic virtue, mutual respect also requires a willingness and ability to deliberate. With these elaborations, Gutmann offers us a thick and somewhat programmatic conception of mutual respect. This is not a weakness. It is precisely in its programmatic form that the notion of mutual respect guides the selection of curriculum content and of pedagogical styles appropriate to democratic education. What Gutmann has demonstrated, I think, is that a thick conception of mutual respect can serve as a principle for developing and evaluating educational policy and practice.

Mutual respect is a principle which operates within the domain of practical reasoning for it guides us in answering the questions of what we should do and how we should do it, given our commitment to sustaining or building democracy. But in the domain of practical reasoning principles are not rules. They have application and are interpreted in the light of particular circumstances.<sup>2</sup> This observation leads me to ask some critical questions about one Professor Gutmann's conclusions. You will recall that she uses the principle of mutual respect in a blanket ruling against two extreme educational positions: separatist particularism at the one extreme and transcendental universalism at the other. Notwithstanding the strength of her arguments and the importance of the principle at stake, I want to ask, first, Are there no circumstances under which segregated schools are justified? and, second, Are there no circumstances under which the project of building a common polity should take precedence over the recognition of cultural diversity? I take a deeply uncomfortable risk even in posing these questions. While the first might be read as the prologue to an apology for apartheid, the second might be read as the prologue to an apology for state-driven indoctrination. Heaven forbid!

The first question arises from a worry about the possible implications of Gutmann's argument for single sex schools or linguistically segregated schools. If we accept her argument, are such schools to be rejected as incompatible with the principles of democratic education? Gutmann rejects racially segregated schools on the grounds that they bolster self-esteem at the expense of mutual respect. Can the same be said of single sex schools? Recent historical and ethnographic studies of boys boarding schools in South Africa and the United Kingdom suggest that these schools do indeed foster aspects of masculinity — for example, cruelty, snobbery, and chauvinism — that are antithetical to the civic virtue of mutual respect.<sup>3</sup> No doubt girls' schools construct femininity in equally problematic ways, but there are feminist educationists who defend girls schools on the grounds that they are more likely to provide the conditions for girls to flourish intellectually and that such flourishing cultivates self-esteem. Girls' schools and colleges, then, may provide instances of a form of segregated schooling which does not aim to increase self-esteem through discriminatory means.

The more pressing question from the current South African perspective is whether linguistically segregated schools violate the principles of democratic education. A feature of the newly formed democracy in South Africa is equal recognition of all eleven of the country's major languages as official languages. While English is likely to be the main language of instruction in secondary and tertiary education, Afrikaans will continue to have a place not only for Afrikaans-speaking white South Afrikaans but a substantial proportion of the so-called coloured community, especially in the Western Cape, and in rural schools in provinces like KwaZulu Natal, Mpumalanga and the North West different African languages may, if local communities so choose, become the main medium of instruction in elementary schools. Does Gutmann's argument compel us to conclude that by opening the way for choice in the language of instruction South Africa will undermine its newly expressed commitment to democratic education?

There is an intricate nest of issues here, far too intricate for me to disentangle in this brief response. One issue — the relationship between language, culture and nation — leads me from the question of whether there are circumstances under which segregated schooling of some sort might be justifiable to the question of whether there are circumstances under which the project of building a common polity should override the recognition of cultural diversity.

Among progressive educators and policy advocates in South Africa, it is fairly widely assumed that the democratic project cannot succeed unless it is accompanied by emergence of a South African nation, a nation no longer fragmented along ethnic and racial lines. Nation-building is thus claimed to be the primary task of education. On the face of it, arguments for nation-building might seem to be arguments from a position of transcendental universalism. If this is so and if we accept Gutmann's analysis, then it would seem that the project education for nation-building must be rejected as undemocratic. But here's a conundrum: on the one hand, it seems that education for nation-building is undemocratic; on the other, it seems to be necessary for establishing and sustaining democracy in a society fragmented by apartheid.

Amy Gutmann's principle of mutual respect may provide a solution. As a principle of integration, mutual respect requires that people be respected both as South African citizens and as Zulus and Afrikaners and Muslims and Jews (to name a few). As a generative or programmatic principle, mutual respect sets at least part of the agenda for education in South Africa: in addition to a curriculum that recognises and celebrates diversity by including the history and literary and cultural achievements of all South Africa's people, schools have the task of fostering a deliberative citizenry. What is entailed in the task is a critical and open question, one which itself calls for deliberation.

This brief response has skimmed over important and complex issues, both in professor Gutmann's paper and in the struggle to go beyond formal democracy in South Africa. I have tried to show, on the debit side, that parts of her argument raise more questions than they answer and, on the credit side, that her thick conception of mutual respect is versatile and robust principle for integrating the projects of civic unity and cultural diversity.

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1. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).
  2. On the particularity of practical reasoning see, for instance, Martha Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality" in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 54-105.
  3. For instance: Robert Morrell "Masculinity and the White Boys' Boarding Schools of Natal, 1880-1930," *Perspectives in Education* vol. 15, no 1 (Summer 1993/94): 27-52.

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