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Democratic Community as a Public of Others: Combating Failed Citizenship in Refugees

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Fadi¹ was a surgeon for 15 years before he and his family were resettled from Syria to Chicago. Since arriving here, he's been able to take work as CNA in a nursing home and has been trying to figure out what of his education may be able to transfer so that he can enroll in nursing school. His wife, formerly a CPA, has had more success with gig economy jobs, but her choppy English has led to several failed interviews for full time work. "She's absolutely fluent in French, but alas we did not arrive there," (Haarman, 2020). His daughter has been adjusting well, partially because her English has been improving fast, but her failing grades in history courses (of a country she did not grow up in) meant she was not tracked into other AP courses and likely will not be eligible for some scholarships, as there is little time to turn her GPA around before she will graduate from highschool next year. Conversations with their neighbors have been awkward since they called the police to Fadi's apartment, claiming their Eid celebration was too loud. "They tell me I am so blessed to be here," Fadi shared with a smirk. "I tell them being alive is good and end the conversation."

Whether through difficulties in accessing equitable education, social stigma, or finding that their own skills and training are not recognized, many refugees find that although they are able to establish a stable life, they do not experience a deep sense of welcome or enthusiasm from the broader nation. Even in countries where there is robust educational support for their transition, many refugees are tracked into vocational studies, with only their children or the second generation reaching the same level of education and economic success as natives (Crul, 2019). It is unsurprising that some communities feel marginalized in their new places of residence despite often having more legal rights than they did before.

James Banks (2017) has come up with his own typology of experiences of citizenship and described how they manifest in the individual's civic participation and orientation to the nation. He believes that many refugees experience what he calls *failed citizenship*. In failed citizenship, citizens have the legal rights extended to all citizens, but are ambivalent towards the nation, do not internalize the nations' values, and

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tend to act only to support their own internal group. The failure in failed citizenship belongs to the larger democratic society for not integrating these individuals in a meaningful way. Banks (2019) believes that failed citizenship is often the result of experiences of discrimination, pressure to assimilate at the cost of cultural erasure, mediocre civic education, and lack of opportunities for meaningful civic action for the greater whole.

This paper will argue that resettled refugees' experience of failed citizenship in the United States is actually a bellwether for the challenges of democratic community for all citizens. A primary challenge is the political paradox of forming a community that is heterogeneous, yet is committed, connected, and has the capacity to work together across differences. This tension is often exacerbated by the poor civic education programs that teach stagnant models of citizenship and portray a false unity in civic narrative and experience in the classroom. The paper will then present Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the Other and John Dewey's conception of the public as ways to reframe our responsibility to and capacity to work with fellow citizens in diverse democratic communities while also not demanding assimilation or erasure. It will then recommend using experiential learning and Beista's 'community of those who have nothing in common' to reframe civic education in the classroom to combat failed citizenship in all citizens, whether native born or just arrived.

Failed Citizenship in the Democratic Community

Banks (2017) says that a minimum threshold definition of citizenship is one in which citizens have rights and privileges within a democratic state. However, these narrow parameters do not account for the complexity of multicultural democratic nations and thus offer an anemic standard of what civic identity entails. Because this minimal definition is often all that is promised and expected, Banks says many groups experience a failed citizenship - where their rights are established by law, but little is done to ensure access to those rights or engage a citizen beyond offering a legal status.

Failed citizenship is marked by feelings of distrust and exclusion. These individuals experience overt and covert structural exclusion, leading to a level of ambivalence towards the country (Banks, 2017). This often manifests in low participation in democratic functions, a belief that their actions may not make a difference, and a perception that the government is not actually invested in their flourishing. Failed citizens do not trust that they will be assisted by the nation state or outside communities in this goal and often their primary self-articulated identity is their ethnic, racial, or religious group. As a result, it is common for these groups to focus on their own care and often create their own spaces. Their identity as a member of the nation state is strongly secondary, if it is articulated or claimed at all.

Refugee communities often experience failed citizenship through the disconnect between the rights they supposedly gained upon resettlement and their current reality because of experiences of discrimination and harassment in employment, the public sphere, and in schools. Any access they are given often comes at the cost of the suppression of their own cultural heritage, language, values, or customs. Being an American citizen can often appear to mean no longer being who they are when they were resettled.

The role that schooling plays in the life of refugee communities becomes essential to the prevention of failed citizenship. John Dewey said that children have to experience democracy in order to internalize its values and habits and believed that education and schooling were one of the best opportunities. Banks (2017) believes human rights are also best experienced through schools.

In order for human rights ideals to be implemented in schools and to become meaningful for noncitizen children and youth, they must speak to and address the

children's and youth's experiences, personal identities, hopes, struggles, dreams, and possibilities. In other words, in order for students to internalize the concept of human rights, they must have experiences in school as well as in the larger society that validate them as human beings; affirm their ethnic, cultural, racial, and linguistic identities; and empower them as individuals in school and in the larger society (2019, p. 239)

Although most American schools offer some level of civic education curriculum aimed to engender a strong civic identity and active citizenship in students, most teachers adopt a single narrative of nationhood, focusing on traditional founding fathers (most of whom are white) and base level mechanics of governance. This promotes a simplistic civic national identity that minimizes the capacity and role for refugee communities within it (Banks, 2017). Refugee students and teachers both point out a massive disconnect between the content of civics textbooks and the current community's own realities. However, discussion of this tension rarely occurs, in part because of instructors' fear of causing conflict between students (Dryden-Peterson, 2019). Schools often exacerbate this tension by either placing students in classrooms in which they do not know the language while offering minimal support and guidance or separating them until they require requisite language skills. Both of these situations of "integration" involve a level of exclusion.

The Threat of Unity in Democratic Community

This failure of the larger polity to support the integration of new citizens presents a clear and present danger to democracy. Healthy democracies depend upon both the participation and trust of citizens. Refugees are the example par excellence of the paradox of democratic community. They have arrived to the United States having grown up elsewhere and potentially with a deep desire to return, even if that is not possible. They are negotiating sudden immersion into a new culture while also dealing with economic and social roadblocks to thriving. The easiest way to help them come to actively participate in civic life would be to encourage them to assimilate, but doing so would then strip them of the most valuable contributions they can make to the democratic process - their new and potentially differing perspectives. However, if they do not assimilate, they will find themselves alienated from full participation in society and likely withdraw from broader civic life, focusing primarily on those that share their own cultural framework.

Educators may find themselves at a loss as to how to create engaging educative experiences for refugee communities which help foster civic belonging and skills, but do not threaten to mute or suppress the essential differing perspectives that they bring. Additionally, many community-based learning courses that work with refugee communities focus only on their integration into American society, leaving the students who participate in them potentially complicit in fostering failed citizenship and advancing a singular narrative of what American culture should be.

Levinas' "Other" as Fellow Citizen

In the face of this potential impasse that threatens the success of both refugee and the broader democratic community, the work of Emmanuel Levinas provides a helpful conceptual framework for educators, especially those designing community-based learning courses. Levinas' concept of "the Other" and its ethical obligation presents the possibility of a form of community in which the distinctive ipseity of members is never compromised or subsumed - where difference is a necessity that binds (Zhao, 2016). For Levinas, the best description of human existence is being situated in relation to another person with whom one is in proximity—what he calls the Other. This framework becomes helpful as citizenship is marked by its relationality. To be a citizen is to have a formal relationship with a nation state and through the designation an implied relationship to every other citizen. A citizen is who they are because of relationships to other citizens and that relationship is not one of choice, but rather contingent to their very existence.

Beyond just recognition, Levinas believed that the self is constituted by this encounter. A person exists because of another and is themselves the Other to someone else. When encountering the Other, the person meets something that cannot be reduced to or filtered fully through their own experience. This encounter also sparks an ethical challenge (May, 1997). The Other helps solidify the identity of the individual because the person now has a more coherent understanding of how the categories and particularities they hold (in which the Other cannot be subsumed into) make them uniquely themselves. A native-born's encounter with a refugee makes them fully aware of their own identity as a native born citizen and they have the choice to recognize and value this difference or deny the refugee's very self. If the individual recognizes the Other as a unique being who cannot be subsumed and made to fit into pre-existing categories, they recognize what Levinas saw as sacred dignity (Zhao, 2016).

This distinction of self-hood for Levinas means that an accurate definition and understanding of the "self" includes the responsibility to and in the service of the other. That means this responsibility is a moral call, and not a manifestation of pity, altruism, or even rational decision making. Bettina Bergo said "Levinas' contribution was to see that responsibility and justice come not for me or my inborn moral sentiments, but from interruptions by the other, or better, from the relation between the other and me." (Bergo, 2008, p 69). Using this frame, community-based learning with refugees communities becomes not about an act of charity, but instead a response to a fellow citizen whose presence is key in helping one understand their own selfhood. Using Levinas' frame of the Other decenters the experience of the native-born citizen as the boilerplate for Americans, and instead encourages encounter and relationship which community-based learning well poised to facilitate.

Levinas' framework for a "community of singularities" helps build a foundation for just relationships between citizens, but it takes a more explicitly political turn when Levinas introduces the concept of the Third. The Third is Levinas's referent for the many people for whom a person is responsible - the other Others (Greenaway, 2016) Their existence introduces the problem of meeting simultaneous, equally important, and potentially conflicting demands - the very heart of democratic civic life.

It is important to clarify that while the presence of the Third complicates the dynamics between a person and the Other, they are not somehow less than or subsidiary (Fagan, 2009).² The Third is the reason that there is the capacity for real moral engagement and not the simple robotic following of pre-established law or guidelines for the treatment of the Other. The Third is another Other who compels a person into relationship. In this way, political life is unavoidable as the Third (all of the other citizens) is always present. In the relationship between United States citizens, it is not a matter of refugees "interrupting" the smooth functions of democratic exchange between already established citizens, making them a secondary concern to be dealt with because it is 'America First.' They are part of this democracy the moment they become proximate and encountered as fellow citizens.

Public Concerns and Public Work

Having used Levinas to establish that a community of singularities is not only possible, but imperative, the next challenge for the civic integration of refugee communities (and for democracy at

large) is how to begin the dialogues across these singularities and undertake common action for the broader community and not just their own groups.

When the relationship to the Other is recognized, citizens find themselves proximate to one another. Dewey (2012) would say that this leads to the discovery of common consequences. This forms informal associations of groups and when these groups become aware of the consequence of their own actions on others in society and vice versa, they can become compelled to action and advocacy. In these moments, for Dewey, they become a *public*. Refugee parents and native born parents both share the consequences of the quality of the local highschool. Their children may access different elements of the school, but the school's successful retention of qualified staff and support programs impact them both. This presents an opportunity for refugee families to work together with native born families to take civic action for a shared goal.

Deweyan publics do not require uniformity of identity, just shared consequences and opportunity for action. Dewey (2012) believed it was through this collective work as publics that local particulars become a critical window to supposed larger universals, nuancing viewpoints and further entangling the lives of neighbors. Groups of citizens who exercise the most power within a nation often believe their interests are shared by the entire polity and are therefore public interest. They typically see the interests of marginalized groups as atypical and irregular (Schlesinger, 1991).

According to Dewey, if the state was not serving the people, it is simply a structure of government and not truly democratic in nature. It has to be responsive to the democratic community, with citizens serving as active observers and critics of the state in order to help it maintain its connection to the public (Dewey, 2012). Dewey believed that the state, which contained a plurality of association within it, had to be capable and willing to grow and evolve as that plurality shifted. He said

Just as publics and states vary with conditions of time and place, so do the concrete functions which should be carried out by states. There is no antecedent universal proposition which can be laid down because of which the functions of a state should be limited or should be expanded. Their scope is something to be critically and experimentally determined (Dewey, 2012, p. 112).

A functioning democracy then needs to change as its citizens change. Dewey described it as, "a kind of net consequence of a vast multitude of responsive adjustments to a vast number of situations, no two of which were alike, but which tended to converge to a common outcome," (2012, p. 122). For Dewey, political forms were not inherently good or bad, but were instead the results of choices made by humans in response to their changing circumstances and relationships.

But what if a nation's democracy and understanding of citizenship did not shift along with demographic changes? For many experiencing failed citizenship, the nation either claims to believe in a value while its policies advocate something else entirely (e.g. the narrative of individuals being created equal while denying suffrage to women and people of color), or it does not reflect any of the values that new members of the community bring with them. The capacity for growth and change over time of a democracy in practice and value becomes essential. Banks said that "communities will find it difficult to develop strong commitments and identities with the nation-state if it does not reflect and incorporate important aspects of their ethnic and community cultures," (2019, p. 372). Citizens need to experience tangible civic equality and be recognized as having value by the state before they can make broader civic commitments.

Education as Midwife: Community-Based Civic Education for a Renewed (or Still Born) Democracy

At its best, civic education prefigures the sort of society it seeks to create. In the face of a changing democratic community, Westheimer (2019) believes that civic education in its current form leaves students unprepared, unenthused, and pushed to accept a historical narrative of the United States as the summation of possible civic life.³ This is a threat to democratic life not only because of the milquetoast and uncritical image of civic identity it presents, but because of the implications of a required assimilation in lieu of difference or disagreement. Dryden-Peterson (2017) also says that poor civic education can recreate insecurity both for teachers and students because it reveals ambiguous allegiances. Refugee students feel they are being pressured to accept a way of being a "good American" that they may not agree with or see any benefit in. In turn, teachers may worry that refugee students' disengagement or even disdain for the sometimes pseudo-jingoist content of civics classes will become a point of conflict between them and students who are native citizens.

As democracy shifts and grows with its people, civic education is failing to keep up. Banks' conception of failed citizenship revolves on the crucial insight that citizenship is more than just legal status. A citizen can legally have a right, but be impeded from using it (i.e. voter suppression). Banks (2005) acknowledges that while his research focused primarily on immigrants and people of color, the typology of failed citizenship may also fit some white people (especially the rural poor) and those groups discriminated against because of their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion. If this stamp of failure seems to fit more citizens than not, a reevaluation is called for how citizenship is conceptualized and taught.

False unity is a trap in civics education that must be avoided if an authentic democratic community can be built. Zhao (2014) cautions that civic education strategies that focus on concepts like "inclusion" or "sense of belonging" often mask an overvaluing of sameness and reinforce for students the perception that differences are unwelcome, lead to conflict, and poison the learning environment. Banks (2017) actually believes that failed citizenship can be reduced by leaning into education about difference and explicitly names culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy and ethnic studies teaching as preferred methods to help students build skills around political efficacy and civic action. While refugee students are often the most obvious, Banks (2019) says that the majority of students in civic classrooms are actually in need of better recognition of the complex, multiple, and often conflicted identities they carry as they work to establish citizenship identities.

Citizens as a Community "Who Have Nothing In Common"

Faced with the reality that most classrooms may be full of students experiencing failed citizenship, civic educators should not attempt to build the false unity that has already been established as pedagogically ineffective and morally questionable because of the way it may push for the erasure of students' alterity. A viable alternative is Gert Biesta's (2004) form of the classroom called 'community of those who have nothing in common'. This community is the contrast to the idea of a rational community where the end goal is a common discourse and individual perspectives are shifted to fit universal categories. The rational community makes the community members rational agents and renders their particularity utterly inessential (Biesta, 2004). Most educational settings often seek (intentionally or not) to create

rational communities so that essential serious information may be conveyed and acquired efficiently.

Alternatively, the 'community of those who have nothing in common' is a space where everyone is a stranger to each other and individuals' particularity (like that of Levinas' Other) are irreducible. Biesta (2004) believes it is both a space of radical ethical encounter and the environment that teachers should seek to create in the classroom. In this space, everyone speaks with their own voice with the emphasis first on dialogue and listening rather than the identification and acquisition of truth. Refugees, native born students, and teachers all talk about civic identity in their own voice using their own frames and perspectives. It shifts the model of learning away from that of the rational community - the passive acquisition of a recognized and universal truth - to something rooted in relationality and particularity. Learning in the 'community of those who have nothing in common' is the experience of *responding* to essential questions with one's particular voice and listening to others. Framed this way, a student does not learn to be a citizen by memorizing the branches of government or the order of rights in the first amendment. They learn when they respond to the unfamiliar and unique narratives the Other brings into the classroom. Biesta (2004) cautions educators that this will disrupt the previous placid operation of the rational community in their classrooms, but he believes it is the beginning of something more.

Citizens are bound to each other as much as they are bound to the place they reside. Refugees with failed citizenship feel a disconnect from the values and larger project of democracy in the United States because the rest of the nation has not sought them out as interlocutors. Zhao (2014) says that democracy ceases to be a field of competition, with groups strategically furthering their own purposes at the cost of others, only when its citizens understand it to be an ethical space where communication on issues of common concern happens. Spaces where citizens can speak freely, raise questions, advocate for solutions to problems *and do so in their own cultural voice* must exist. They must be present and maintained in schools, the great forge of democratic life and proximity, through an experiential and community-based curriculum that is unafraid of difference and sees that the presence of refugees (and anyone else experiencing failed citizenship) is not an interruption. A civic education that combats failed citizenship must encounter the Other with hospitality, curiosity, and a willingness to take the time to let them know this place is theirs too. ■

Notes

1. Fadi is a pseudonym.
2. Fagan says "It is clear that the Third does not enter or interrupt some prior relationship of perfect responsibility, in the sense of the 'real world' getting in the way of [the] ideas of responsibility," (2009, p. 10).
3. "The result for schoolchildren has been a mostly watered-down notion of civics that emphasizes good character and blind patriotism over critical thinking and engaging with multiple perspectives." (Westheimer, 2019, p. 12).

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