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Ethical Reasoning and Risk-Taking When Teaching Patriotism and War.

A Response to *The Foot and the Flag: Patriotism, Place,
and the Teaching of War in a Military Town*

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Abstract

Gibbs's detailed description of decision-making around teaching war in a school that taught the children of active-duty soldiers provides an important glimpse into the numerous factors influencing their curricular and pedagogical choices. Gibbs rightly argued that the limited perspective of patriotism that resulted from the teachers' reluctance to engage their students in a critical analysis of the justness of U.S. wars and foreign policy gives us concern for a robust, liberal democracy. The fear the teachers articulated in broaching the controversial aspects of war correspond to teachers' reluctance to tackle numerous other controversial topics such as race/racism, religion, politics, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Balancing the need teachers share to engage their students in the exploration of complex social issues with a desire to shield students from harmful or uncomfortable interactions involves complex decision-making and ethical judgments. It always involves taking risks by both teachers and students. I propose the jurisprudential framework as a practical guide in developing units around social issues and professional development based in developing collaborative communities of practice in order to create the support necessary for teachers and students to take these risks.

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Introduction

BRIAN GIBBS (2020) provided in "The Foot and the Flag: Patriotism, Place, and the Teaching of War in a Military Town" a close examination of the complex factors that influenced teacher decision-making regarding teaching war and patriotism. When a first-year teacher stepped on an American flag to demonstrate protected free speech and a student

took a video that was played on right-wing media, the teacher was reassigned and their contract not renewed. Gibbs argued that this had a chilling effect on the rest of the social studies teachers when

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teaching war. Through in-depth interviews with nine teachers and extensive classroom observations of five of those teachers, Gibbs illuminated the curricular, pedagogical, cultural, political, and professional dilemmas the teachers faced in deciding how and what to teach about war. The uncritical patriotism that resulted from the teachers' decisions is problematic, but Gibbs's respectful and detailed analysis of the teachers' considerations helps us understand their choices. Gibbs's decision to investigate how students felt about the instruction they received through focus group interviews and personal reflections added an additional layer of complexity. Through his inclusion of the voices of the teachers and their students, we are able to examine the disconnect between what the teachers assumed their students (and parents) wanted compared with what the students said they actually wanted from their history courses.

Gibbs (2020) described three approaches to teaching war that all amounted to promoting patriotic support of U.S. foreign policy and the military. Gibbs labeled the three pedagogies as a pedagogy of patriotism, tension, and facts. All three approaches to teaching war resulted in the teachers explicitly or implicitly teaching an uncritical view of patriotism and war because the students were never engaged in the analysis of the political and military decisions about how and why the wars were fought. Gibbs argued that even the teachers who used a pedagogy of tension or facts avoided critical citizenship. This is devastating for a democracy. There is no greater moral dilemma for a government than deciding whether or not to use force in foreign policy. The framers of the Constitution placed the power to declare war in the legislative branch because they wanted public debate to inform those decisions. War is fraught with moral decisions for leaders, soldiers, and civilians. Unfortunately, the students in these three participating schools were consistently denied an opportunity to critically engage with the persistent moral dilemmas that faced political and military leaders in past or current wars.

Gibbs (2020) argued that while a small number of teachers genuinely believed their role was to teach patriotic citizenship, the majority of teachers wanted to engage their students in a critical analysis of war but felt fear in doing so. They feared retribution by the parents and/or administration or feared making the children of soldiers feel uncomfortable and upset. These are noble and understandable moral responses, not wanting to cause trauma or harm to students. However, the result is that students lack knowledge or skills in grappling with one of the most complex and ethically complicated decisions a government makes, going to war with another nation or group. It is clear the teachers needed support in engaging students in critical analysis of war. They needed encouragement and moral support from their administration and peers, but they also seemed to need a scaffolding or framework to guide the exploration of a war in a way that would be productive. Because most of my work is in developing and conducting professional development with teachers, I kept asking myself how I would assist these teachers in creating learning experiences for their students that would lead to meaningful analysis of the justness of war. I wondered what we, collectively as part of a field, could do about the problem so carefully described in

Gibbs's paper. First, I will argue the jurisprudential framework that would be helpful in scaffolding the teachers' planning of units and lessons about war. Second, I will argue that only when teachers are formed into a collaborative community of practice with administrative support will they be willing to engage in this framework.

Jurisprudential Model

There is no greater moral decision for a democracy than going to war. War, patriotism, and military actions are ripe with complex ethical questions all democracies must ask and answer. The just war theory is taught in the military as a central component of the Geneva Accords and international law. This theory asks two critical questions: when and how should war be fought? These are moral questions that demand the weighing and privileging of values that will often come into conflict, such as national sovereignty versus human dignity. The fact that the military itself teaches and engages soldiers and officers in discussing and debating this theory should give license to any teacher, even Gibbs's teachers in schools heavily populated with military families, to structure their units about war around the ethical questions faced by politicians, citizens, military officers, and soldiers.

I argue that the jurisprudential model of instruction provides a theoretical and practical approach to scaffolding student inquiry into questions of war, peace, and patriotism in productive, nuanced, and respectful directions (Newmann & Oliver, 1970; Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Saye & Brush, 2004). This model of curriculum design assumes that liberal democratic values are all equally essential but inherently in conflict: e.g., majority rule versus minority rights or freedom/liberty versus general welfare (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994; Oliver & Shaver, 1966). The major components of the jurisprudential model ask a teacher to select a specific, bounded case for deep exploration by students. This case should involve legitimate arguments on at least two perspectives or sides. The focus cases, however, should also have analogous cases that cut across time and space. For example, when studying war, there are two persistent issue questions that apply to just war theory: (a) When is one nation justified in imposing its will on another nation? (b) What actions are justified in war/matters of national security? Each of these persistent questions can apply to any war, but an example of a topic-specific central question on Vietnam would be "Were the actions of the U.S. justified in Southeast Asia?" The unit could explore at least two sub-questions: "Was the U.S. justified in getting involved in Vietnam?" and "Were the actions taken in Vietnam justified?"

Once the persistent and central questions are established on the focus case, the teacher lists several types of questions students need to answer in order to debate the central question in an authentic culminating activity (Saye & Brush, 2004). Factual questions center on the critical information students need to answer the central question: "Where is Vietnam?" "Why was it becoming Communist?" "Who was Ho Chi Minh?" "What is the domino theory?" Second, teachers should identify a few concepts that need defining: e.g., "sovereignty," "combatant," "civilian," and "Communism." These concepts become definitional questions and may require a dedicated lesson to develop a definition of each

concept (Parker, 1988). Third, the teachers should identify value questions that should be analyzed and discussed: “To what extent was Communism in Southeast Asia a threat to national security in the U.S.?” “How much information should the public know about military operations and outcomes?” “When are citizens justified in resisting or criticizing a war?” Finally, the teacher should identify one or two specific policy questions the students should answer as a result of the exploration of the focus case. They might ask, “Should the War Powers Act be changed?” or “How should the Vietnam War be remembered?” This jurisprudential framework provides a structure to help teachers develop a unit and then the lessons within that unit that can explore a complex question, like one about the Vietnam War, in a systematic way; this can scaffold the students’ exploration of multiple perspectives. It starts with the assumption that all sides are “patriotic” and “American,” in that all sides are using values of a liberal democracy, but they are privileging the values differently. For example, some groups may see antiwar protestors as disloyal, and others will see them as patriotic depending on their conclusions about the U.S. involvement in the war. Having students examine and discuss “Who should be held responsible for soldiers’ actions during search-and-destroy missions?” would generate robust discussion even among military supporters. It is vital for students to consider how U.S. citizens disagree on political and military policies around war but ground their arguments in central democratic values (Newmann & Oliver, 1970; Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Saye & Brush, 2004). The jurisprudential framework can help teachers find historical resources and develop discussion questions in advance, which can provide confidence and security in a justification for teaching the topic. The Vietnam War was controversial at the time, and it is ahistorical to present it as “settled.” Teachers will find this framework helpful in guiding their lesson development and scaffolding their students’ investigations and discussions of the complex aspects of the topics (Kohlmeier et al., 2011, 2020; Saye et al., 2017).

The jurisprudential framework calls for comparisons of the focus case to other historical or modern analogous cases in order to examine similarities and differences. The students find great power in these analogous cases because they see relevance and usefulness in the history they are learning. When they are asked to compare their ethical decisions in one case to their decision in another case, the students are required to explain similarities or differences in their decisions based in the values they are privileging in each case and across cases. They also experience a more accurate view of history. Gibbs (2020) described Ms. Smith (and one other participant) as using a “pedagogy of facts” and teaching a critical view of war but only from her prescribed narrative. Her approach gave students the false sense of history being a settled story that was inevitable. History should be taught with students reading, viewing, and analyzing multiple perspectives from people who themselves debated the questions of going to war at the time it was occurring. Studying a case example of political, military, and civilian perspectives who argued about whether and how a war should be fought shows students that history is not a set, predetermined experience. Citizens have been debating the justifications for war throughout human history. This method also exposes them

to the fact that military leaders themselves often opposed or supported war. They debated ethical tactics and weaponry during war. Students should be allowed to consider these perspectives from the past as a way to see the persistent nature of these questions and relate them to their own experiences.

A powerful component of Gibbs’s (2020) paper was his inclusion of students’ perspectives on how war was being taught in their schools. In focus group interviews and personal reflective journals, the students expressed a desire for their teachers to engage them in conversations about the complexities of war. One student expressed that she “loved” the conversation Gibbs held with them about war and desired similar discussion opportunities from her teachers. I have found this to be true in my own research. I observed U.S. government teachers lead Socratic seminars with high school seniors on the Pledge of Allegiance, asking “To what are you pledging?” (Parker, 2007). At the end of each seminar, students consistently expressed feelings of anger and frustration that this was the first time in their schooling they had been asked to interpret the deep meanings of the concepts in the pledge: allegiance, republic, flag, nation, indivisible, liberty, and justice. They were also ready and able to engage in nuanced conversations with each other about how they felt about overtly patriotic acts such as reciting the pledge and national anthem in general and in school. They appreciated hearing their classmates’ divergent opinions. We have found students capable and eager to engage with complex texts and each other over meaty issues of just versus unjust laws (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2014a) and free speech, specifically flag burning (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2014b). The context of our study was similar to Gibbs’s research sites. The two schools were located in a politically conservative region 30 miles from a major military base. The teachers in Gibbs’s study kept referring to their students as “vulnerable.” The student quotes from Gibbs’s paper and my own research provide different adjectives. Students seem curious, thoughtful, and adventurous. Adolescents crave the opportunity to talk about adult topics and think with each other, especially when that discussion is facilitated by a teacher (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2014a, 2014b, 2019). This led me to think about Gibbs’s final point, in the conclusion of his paper, in which he described the fear the teachers had of raising controversy in the study of war. What do we do about the fear these teachers felt? What can we do to help them navigate their fears and vulnerabilities in order to provide these essential learning experiences for their students?

Collaborative Communities of Practice and Teacher Risk-Taking

Gibbs (2020) noted in his introduction that the teachers in his study were afraid. They were afraid of the community (and their students who might film them); they were afraid of unwanted media coverage; they were afraid of their administrators and possibly even each other. It is interesting they seemed only afraid of parents or community members who would criticize them for engaging in critical analysis of war. Garrett (2017) raised the question of why teachers aren’t also afraid of parents who would criticize them for *not* engaging their students in debating the morality of a war. Regardless of whom the teachers fear, the fear makes them risk

averse. It's especially challenging for them to act boldly because they seem to feel they are alone. Most of the teachers in Gibbs's study wanted to teach differently. Many articulated they were being inauthentic to their beliefs about what their students needed in choosing to avoid the controversial aspects of teaching about war. The teachers would be taking a risk if they taught war through the jurisprudential approach I advocate. How would we encourage teachers to engage in this unit design pedagogy they consider risky? Le Fevre (2014) argued that teachers consider two risk factors when deciding to change their practice: (a) Will it harm my students? (b) Will I lose what I value? The teachers in Gibbs's study would not change their practice because they felt it would harm their students and they might lose their jobs.

Researchers in professional development (PD) are seeing promising results in Lesson Study, a PD structure that generates a team of classroom teachers and teacher educators (and often content experts as well) that work together develop curriculum and pedagogical strategies and then continue implementing and evaluating the lessons over the academic year (Hiebert & Stigler, 2017; Lewis, 2009; Lewis et al., 2006; Lieberman, 2009). In the studies I mentioned earlier, in which we had success encouraging teachers to lead discussions on topics of patriotism and law, the U.S. government teachers worked together for two years creating three units organized in the jurisprudential framework (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2014a, 2014b, 2019). They worked together to establish student learning goals for the topics, create an ethical question to frame the topic, find rich texts, and develop question scripts to explore the factual, conceptual, and value questions in the texts. The teachers observed each other facilitate the class discussion and provided feedback to each other to improve their practice. We have also seen some success in a three-year professional development project in which grade-level teams developed history units centered on ethical questions using the jurisprudential model (Kohlmeier et al., 2020). De La Paz et al. (2011) studied teachers engaged in a four-day summer PD with the option of engaging in "networking" sessions throughout the school year. They found that the teachers who heavily engaged in the networking continued to implement the inquiry-based lessons, while the other teachers did so much less. These studies indicate that teachers who see themselves as part of a team in which they develop, test, and refine lessons collaboratively are much more likely to take pedagogical risks. However, without administrative and departmental support, any meaningful, sustained change will be unlikely (Kohlmeier et al., 2020; Meuwissen, 2017). The most powerful "teams" are those that include members of a department where administrators are encouraging and supporting the pedagogical risk-taking.

Gibbs's (2020) piece made me think about the graduates of my own teacher education program, which focuses on developing teachers who will engage students in the investigation of complex social issues. We know early teachers struggle to maintain their commitment to inquiry-based methods because they become socialized into the faculty culture of their schools, which typically resists inquiry. Demonstrating in explicit ways to our teacher candidates the importance and possibility of maintaining

professional ties with like-minded teachers is important. However, it is apparent that they also need to be prepared to create collaborative communities of practice within their own departments. The "lone wolf" probably can't survive very long, as we saw with the new teacher who was removed. However, if the teachers in the department had regular meetings about their goals for their students, they might recognize that many of them share a goal of more democratic patriotism and critical analysis of history and war. Working together they might feel supported and emboldened to present students with the ethical dilemmas inherent in the history of war and give the students the type of education they deserve and crave. This leads me to conclude that teacher education programs should build more collaborative lesson development assignments that mirror the Lesson Study PD we have found effective. They need to see that teaching should be a collaborative profession that encourages risk-taking for students and teachers. They should see risk-taking as essential but more fruitful when done in collaboration with colleagues.

Gibbs's (2020) paper is powerful because the fear he described in this context is seen often in teachers avoiding the risk of talking with students about politics, religion, race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and so many other topics. I recently read Lythcott-Haimes's (2015) parenting book *How to Raise an Adult*. She argued parents need to stop asking, "How do I keep my child safe?" and instead ask, "What level of risk is necessary for me to raise my child as a competent adult?" I argue teachers need to make the same shift. Teaching for liberal democracy requires risk-taking for both teachers and students. Secondary students need to practice the moral reasoning liberal democracy demands both to help them navigate adolescence and in preparation for adulthood. This requires teachers and students to lean into uncomfortable spaces where they are confronted with ideas different from their own. True patriotism emerges from an awakening of respect for the fragility of the democratic form of government. Teacher educators must begin preparing our future teachers to take risks in exploring the ethical questions of the past and present by providing preparation in pedagogy based in the jurisprudential framework and skills to develop professional communities that desire a commitment to thoughtful, ethical risk-taking.

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