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Failed Citizenship, Civic Engagement, and Education

by James A. Banks



Abstract

Many racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups are denied structural inclusion into their nation-state. Consequently, they do not internalize the values and symbols of the nation-state, develop a strong identity with it, or acquire political efficacy. The author conceptualizes this process as “failed citizenship,” compares and contrasts it with “successful citizenship,” and describes the role of schools in reducing failed citizenship and helping marginalized groups become successful and efficacious citizens in multicultural nation-states.

Key words: civic engagement, failed citizenship, political efficacy, structural inclusion, transformative citizenship education

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In 2004, France banned the wearing of veils by Muslim students in state schools. A French law that took effect in April 2011 prohibits women

from going to public sites with their faces covered by a veil. In a Parisian suburb, two French youths of North African heritage were electrocuted on October 27, 2005, when they ran into a power substation while escaping from the police. Their deaths triggered a series of riots in French suburbs that lasted for almost three weeks. In a series of tragic events in Paris that occurred between January 7 and 9, 2015, 17 people lost their lives in conflicts that resulted from many complex factors related to cultural and religious diversity as well

as to social class—including a contentious depiction of the Prophet Muhammad in *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical magazine—but also from the alienation and structural exclusion of Muslim youth within French society (Erlanger, 2015).

These events are connected and interrelated because each is a manifestation of a phenomenon I call *failed citizenship* (Banks, 2015). Muslims in France have not attained structural inclusion into French society, experience marginalization, and do not have civic equality or recognition within the schools or the larger society (Gutmann, 2004). Most Muslim youths in France have a difficult time attaining a French identity and believe that most White French citizens do not view them as French. On November 7, 2005, a group of young French males of North African descent were interviewed on PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, 2005) television in the United States. One of them said, “I have French papers but when I go to the police station they treat me as if I am not French.” The citizenship status of Muslims in France epitomizes failed citizenship.

Failed and Successful Citizenship

Citizenship socialization is unsuccessful and fails when individuals who are born within the nation or migrate to it and live within it for an extended period of time do not internalize the values and ethos of the nation-state, feel structurally excluded within it, and have highly ambivalent feelings toward it. Racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups that are victims of failed citizenship experi-

ence political alienation, have ambivalent national identities, and feel structurally excluded and politically separate within their nation-state. These groups also lack political efficacy and have low levels of political engagement and political participation in the polity.

Successful citizenship differs significantly from failed citizenship. Successful or effective citizenship socialization occurs when individuals who live within a nation-state internalize its basic values and symbols, acquire an allegiance to those values, and are willing to take action to actualize national values and to protect and defend the nation-state if it is endangered. Successful citizens also have high levels of civic engagement and participation. Groups that have racial, cultural, linguistic, religious, and physical characteristics similar to those of the dominant groups in society are much more likely to be successful citizens than groups that are marginalized because of their differences.

Failed citizenship exists in nations around the world, including the Western immigrant nations such as the United States, Canada, and Australia as well as nations in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The Kurds in Turkey, Ethiopians in Israel, Chechens in Russia, Tibetans in China, and Afro-Caribbeans in England are victims of failed citizenship. Failed citizenship is a fluid, contextual, and complex concept. Some marginalized groups experience failed citizenship at a much higher level than others. The Chechens in Russia exemplify failed citizenship at extremely high levels because they feel disconnected from Russia and want a separate nation (Hughes, 2001). The

case of African Americans is complex and nuanced. Although all African Americans experience institutionalized racism to some extent—witness the cogent commencement address on race that First Lady Michelle Obama gave at Tuskegee University on May 9, 2015 (Capehart, 2015)—their experience is mediated by social class in intricate ways, as Wilson (1980) pointed out in his visionary and controversial book *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. The higher their social class, the more African Americans can escape the most virulent forms of racism and discrimination.

When Failed Citizenship Occurs

Failed citizenship occurs when the social, cultural, economic, and political systems within a nation-state prevent marginalized groups from attaining full structural inclusion into the nation. They consequently develop weak identities with the nation-state and low levels of allegiance to it. They participate at minimum levels in the political system and often focus on particularistic goals and issues rather than on the overarching interests and goals of the nation-state. Their first and primary identity is their ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic, or religious group rather than the nation-state. When successful citizenship occurs, the social, cultural, economic, and political systems facilitate the structural inclusion of diverse groups into the nation-state and its dominant institutions. Consequently, individuals and groups who attain successful citizenship develop strong attach-

ments, allegiances, and identities with the nation-state or polity.

Schools can help victims of failed citizenship by enabling them to attain a sense of structural inclusion into their society and nation, political efficacy, and higher levels of political engagement and participation. Students from marginalized groups should be able to maintain essential aspects of their ethnic and cultural identities when they become successful citizens and are structurally included into the mainstream civic culture. It is also important for the national culture to change so that it can incorporate and accommodate the cultures of diverse groups. Students from diverse groups should not have to experience “self-alienation” or “deculturalization” (Spring, 2004) in order to become successful citizens in the national civic culture.

Structural Inclusion and Successful Citizenship

People are structurally included within their nation when they have political efficacy, political empowerment, and a belief that they can influence political and economic decisions that affect their lives by participating in the political system. In other words, individuals who feel structurally included within the civic culture of their nation have political efficacy and a belief that their participation in the polity can make a difference. They are successful citizens.

Students who feel structurally included within their nation-state and society believe that they are an integral part of their nation-state, have clarified national identities, and

view themselves as authentic and full citizens. Research on immigrant youth in the United States by Maira (2004), Abu El-Haj (2007), and Nguyen (2012) indicated that immigrant youth have complex national identities. These researchers found that the immigrant youths in their studies did not define their national identities in terms of their places of residence, but felt that they belonged to national communities that transcended the boundaries of the United States. They defined their national identities as Palestinian, Vietnamese, Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi. They believed that an individual could be Palestinian or Vietnamese and live in many different nation-states. The youth in these studies distinguished between national identity and citizenship. They viewed themselves as Palestinian, Vietnamese, or Pakistani, but also recognized and acknowledged their U.S. citizenship, which they valued for the privileged legal status and other opportunities it gave them. One of the Vietnamese students in Nguyen’s (2012) study said, “I know that you can become an American citizen. But Vietnamese and other immigrants cannot become Americans like the real Americans” (p. 120). These students did not believe that they were “Americans” because to be American was to be White and middle-class. Students who are structurally included within American society believe that they are both citizens of the United States and Americans. They also have clarified national identities as well as political efficacy.

People who are not structurally included within the political and cultural system of their nation-state

are politically alienated, lack political efficacy, and participate at low levels in the political system. They are victims of failed citizenship and often do not vote because they believe that their votes do not make a difference and that politicians don’t care about them. They also have negative views of politicians. In her important study, *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*, Cohen (2010) found that Black and Latino youth have a high level of political alienation, which has a negative effect on political activism, political engagement, and political participation.

How Schools Can Increase Civic Engagement

An important goal of civic education should be to help students from marginalized groups attain a sense of structural integration and inclusion within their nation-states and clarified national identities. Research reveals that the content and methods of school-based civics and culturally responsive teaching can promote structural inclusion and reduce failed citizenship. Research by Callahan and Muller (2013) suggested that the civic knowledge that students attain along with high levels of social connection within schools increase the civic efficacy and political engagement of immigrant students. Consequently, courses that teach civic knowledge within classrooms and schools that promote high levels of social connection among students can help them to develop a sense of structural inclusion.

The research on culturally responsive teaching by scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1994), Lee (2007),

and Au (2011) indicated that students of color become more actively engaged in learning, acquire more knowledge, and attain an increased sense of structural inclusion when the content and pedagogy of instruction reflect their histories and cultures (Lee, 2007). Culturally responsive teaching promotes structural inclusion because it gives public recognition and civic equality to the cultures and languages of marginalized students in the community (Gutmann, 2004).

Mainstream and Transformative Citizenship Education

Mainstream citizenship education is practiced in most schools in the United States as well as in other nations. It is grounded in mainstream academic knowledge and assumptions that knowledge is neutral, objective, and uninfluenced by human interests and values (Banks, 1993, 2007). Mainstream citizenship education reinforces the status quo and the dominant power relationships in society. It does not challenge or disrupt the class, racial, or gender discrimination in the schools and society. It focuses heavily on having students memorize historical and political facts, learn the heroic deeds of historical and political leaders, and develop national patriotism. Rubin and Hayes (2010) stated that the traditional social studies curriculum “presents a one dimensional, triumphalist view of U.S. history that does little to engage students or develop understandings of the complexities of freedom, inequality, and the ongoing struggle for rights and justice in society” (p. 355).

To help students acquire the knowledge, values, and skills needed

to become politically engaged and to reduce failed citizenship, citizenship education must be reimagined and *transformative citizenship education* must be implemented. Transformative citizenship education is rooted in transformative academic knowledge, which consists of paradigms and explanations that challenge some of the key epistemological assumptions of mainstream academic knowledge (Banks, 1996). Transformative knowledge assumes that knowledge is not neutral, is influenced by human interests, and reflects the power relationships within society, and that an important purpose of knowledge is to improve society. Feminist scholars and scholars of color have been among the leading constructors of transformative academic knowledge (Code, 1991; Collins, 2000; Takaki, 1993).

Transformative citizenship education recognizes and validates the cultural identities of students while helping them to attain the knowledge and skills required to function effectively in the civic culture of the nation as well as to challenge racial, social class, and gender inequality. It helps students to develop decision-making and social action skills needed to identify problems within society, clarify their values, and take action to enhance democracy and social justice within their communities, nation, and the world. Transformative citizenship education enables students to become both successful citizens and change agents. It is a powerful antidote to failed citizenship. ■

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