What social democracy means to Utah County Educators

What I fail to see in the discussion about Alpine School District’s use of the word “enculturate” and the phrase “social democracy” is the context in which it has been used within the Alpine School District (ASD) and within local teacher education programs. In Sunday’s (February 28) editorial the Daily Herald defined “social democracy” for its readers. I believe the definition to be accurate in the context in which they used it. Unfortunately, many times the editorial writers were discussing words and phrases as they are used in political science but not in the way they are used in the educational literature or in the educational discussions of ASD school teachers/administrators and local institutions of higher education (BYU and UVU Teacher Education Program). I am sure there are other instances in which certain words are interpreted differently across fields of study and across social groups. I hope in the next few paragraphs to help the readers understand how local educators discuss political/social democracy and enculturation by explaining what such terms meant to me when I was teaching for ASD.

Enculturating the Young in a Political and Social Democracy is something ASD teachers have been discussing since at least the 1996-1997 school year. That is when I first started contemplating, for myself, what this phrase meant for my teaching. Through dialogue and discussion with ASD teachers, administrators, and BYU faculty I arrived at the conclusion that this was indeed what I wanted for my classroom. Too many citizens do not participate in our great political democracy (which is not the same as saying we are not a republic. ASD personnel value our great republic and teach about the sacrifices made to maintain our republican form of government). As a result of such discussions, I made the commitment to make sure that none of my students left my classroom without knowing that I expected them to be active citizens in our great republic. While I may fail from time to time to reach my goal, I never miss a chance to tell my students of my love for this great country. This passion to share my love for our political and economic systems directly stems from the countless hours I spent discussing the importance of “enculturating the young in a social and political democracy.”

As a result, I interpreted the word “enculturate” to mean the promotion of the kind of culture our founding fathers set out to promote; a culture of patriotism, free agency, and the right to defend our God given rights. Why wouldn’t I want my students to continue with the ideals our founding fathers imbedded into our culture? Perhaps that is why the Utah Legislature codified the role that Utah school teachers should play in preparing future citizens when they stated that, after parents and guardians, schools are to assist “in the preparation of succeeding generations of informed and responsible citizens who are deeply attached to essential democratic values and institutions...”(Utah Code 53A-13-109 section E). If any on the editorial staff want to disagree with my interpretation of “enculturate” they are welcome to do so but I can guarantee that my usage is what was discussed in the dozens of meetings I attended while a teacher and administrator in the district. I know ASD personnel and you will not find more patriotic, ethical teachers anywhere in this country. I’m not sure which teachers the editorial writers interviewed (or how long they discussed the concepts with them) but I can assure you that they could not be speaking for the majority. In addition, if you have met the majority of members of the ASD school board, ASD administration, and BYU and UVU educational faculty you will
find them to be a straight laced group of Utah Valley conservatives. Anyone who paints such people otherwise does not know the hearts of those they are accusing.

What about social democracy? Again, through much dialogue I came to the conclusion that our schools need to have students participating socially by communicating with each other rather than talking past each other (as is sometimes modeled by adults who are passionate about a topic). How will they do that in a public arena if they don’t first do it in a school? In that way they will grow up to be neighbors who stand up for one another. At the same time, we all understand that sometimes neighbors will not get along. Enculturating students to participate in a social democracy means helping students understand that our country is based upon a free exchange of ideas with our neighbors. A civil exchange. Lack of civility endangers the culture that our republican mothers and fathers fought so hard to achieve. Our founding fathers and mothers did have to fight and at times not be civil but those were under extreme circumstances that do not exist within ASD.

If enculturating the young in a social and political democracy is truly viewed from within the context in which it is used in ASD it will become obvious that they are espousing the very ideas that past legislatures have codified for all teachers in our public schools. As you read the following sections of Utah Code 53A-13-109 (accessed 02-28-2010) please explain to me how such language is not about “enculturating the young in a social and political democracy.”


(1) As used in this section:
(a) "Character Education" means reaffirming values and qualities of character which promote an upright and desirable citizenry.
(b) "Civic Education" means the cultivation of informed, responsible participation in political life by competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of representative democracy in Utah and the United States.
(c) "Values" means time-established principles or standards of worth.

(2) The Legislature recognizes that:
(a) Civic and Character Education are fundamental elements of the public education system's core mission as originally intended and established under Article X of the Utah Constitution;
(b) Civic and Character Education are fundamental elements of the constitutional responsibility of public education and shall be a continuing emphasis and focus in public schools;
(c) the cultivation of a continuing understanding and appreciation of representative democracy in Utah and the United States among succeeding generations of educated and responsible citizens is important to the nation and state;
(d) the primary responsibility for the education of children within the state resides with their parents or guardians and that the role of state and local governments is to support and assist parents in fulfilling that responsibility;
(e) public schools fulfill a vital purpose in the preparation of succeeding generations of informed and responsible citizens who are deeply attached to essential democratic values and institutions; and
(f) the happiness and security of American society relies upon the public virtue of its citizens which requires a united commitment to a moral social order where self-interests are willingly subordinated to the greater common good.

(3) Through an integrated curriculum, students shall be taught in connection with regular school work:
(a) honesty, integrity, morality, civility, duty, honor, service, and obedience to law;
(b) respect for and an understanding of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitutions of the United States and of the State of Utah;
(c) Utah history, including territorial and preterritorial development to the present;
(d) the essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system;
(e) respect for parents, home, and family;
(f) the dignity and necessity of honest labor; and
(g) other skills, habits, and qualities of character which will promote an upright and desirable citizenry and better prepare students to recognize and accept responsibility for preserving and defending the blessings of liberty inherited from prior generations and secured by the constitution.

(4) Local school boards and school administrators may provide training, direction, and encouragement, as needed, to accomplish the intent and requirements of this section and to effectively emphasize Civic and Character Education in the course of regular instruction in the public schools.

(5) Civic and Character Education in public schools are:

(a) not intended to be separate programs in need of special funding or added specialists to be accomplished; and
(b) core principles which reflect the shared values of the citizens of Utah and the founding principles upon which representative democracy in the United States and the state of Utah are based.

Enacted by Chapter 196, 2004 General Session

Let’s show our own children and neighbors that we as citizens of Utah are “encultured” in the “blessings of liberty inherited by from prior generations and secured by the Constitution” by modeling our belief in the above practices. Let’s model for our children the type of civility we want from them. Let’s show them how adults discuss difficult topics. Let’s show them that we think thoughtfully and critically about context rather than charging head first into accusations. I have to admit I was a little heated when I read the Daily Herald’s editorial. I wanted immediately to defend the many teachers, administrators, and school board members who put in countless, unpaid hours so that our students can truly learn about all of the facets of democracy and a republican form of government. I was saddened by the hostile words (wormy think tank, pompous academic jargon) within a professional editorial. I can’t blame anyone for fearing the possible negative influence that a poorly run school system may have on its students. I applaud Mrs. Schnell for alerting the district about a link to such a disturbing essay to which I too disagree and so would the dozens of ASD personnel that I personally know. However, the glitch is fixed, it was not part of a socialist conspiracy, and we should now move on to focusing on educational issues that are real and need real discussion and dialogue.

Finally, if I (and perhaps ASD personnel) are using political phrases incorrectly, then please show us that there is only one meaning for such phrases and that phrases such as “social democracy” cannot be used or interpreted any other way at any other time. You make such a case when you suggest educators find “other professions where ignorance of politics, history and economics wouldn’t be such a liability.” I will counter (and I’m not sure how to write this in a way that doesn’t offend, because that is not my purpose) by stating that editorial writers who write about educational topics need to research the educational literature to see how certain terms are discussed among educators. If you will research how the terms “social democracy” and “enculturate” are used in the conceptual framework and/or mission statements of many institutions of higher learning and ASD you will find that “social democracy” is not used in the way that political scientists use those combinations of words. I’m sure you did not mean to use the word “ignorant” in a disparaging way- we all make mistakes and perhaps thousands of educators
are misusing the phrase “social democracy” - but the fact remains that the phrase “social democracy” is used differently by educators than it is by political scientists, and members of your editorial staff should have made that clear to your readers. Please, before you use inflammatory rhetoric when discussing ASD hold a civil dialogue with them and model for your readers the thoughtful insights that can usually be found in the editorial section of your newspaper.

Sincerely,

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