

Becoming Citizens in an Era of Globalization and Transnational Migration: Re-imagining Citizenship as Critical Practice

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Becoming Citizens in an era of globalization and transnational migration:

Re-imagining citizenship as critical practice

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Abstract

This article examines how the perspectives and experiences of Arab American youth from immigrant communities can help educators think about what it means to teach young people to become active participants in the social, civic, and political spheres within and across the boundaries of nation-states. Arab American youths' perspectives are reflective of the transnational nature of their life experiences, as well as the unfortunate ways they have been positioned as enemy-outsiders to the U.S. in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Listening closely to the experiences and perspectives of these young people yields concrete implications for designing citizenship education that reflects the changing nature of belonging and citizenship. This article proposes that we stop thinking about citizenship primarily in relation to national identifications and begin to see it as a set of critical *practices*—practices that give young people the tools to work for social change within and across the boundaries of nation-states.

Becoming Citizens in an era of globalization and transnational migration:

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We're sitting in the auditorium full of Americans in the morning. When we get up and Americans look at us, and they're like, "Oh my God. She's wearing a mandeel (headscarf), and she's standing for our flag." Even though I'm not saying the Pledge of Allegiance, I stand up as a matter of respect toward those people. I love when they look at me, especially those teachers and they're like, "Look. She has respect toward herself and others because she's standing up for our flag." Even though it is my flag too, because I'm living in the United States of America. I don't feel that it's my flag, but the truth is, you're a U.S. citizen, so it's your flag . . . I feel like they're pledging for—there are the American troops in Iraq killing Arabs. So when I think about it, it's like me praying for the troops to kill more Arabs. That's how I think of pledging to the flag. (Samira, Palestinian American high school junior.)

Samira's discussion of the daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance reflects the complex nature of belonging and citizenship in the contexts of global migration and the United States's "war on terror." Samira felt conflicted about her relationship to the U.S. flag and, despite her status as a citizen, found herself positioned as different from "Americans." The conflicted nature of this relationship came from multiple sources. As a Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, and U.S. citizen, she felt unable to pledge allegiance to the U.S. because, from her perspective, this implied support for the war in Iraq that is, as she says, "killing

Arabs.” Moreover, in the post September 11, 2001 context, as a young woman who was visibly a practicing Muslim, Samira felt a need to show “Americans” respect by “standing up for [their] flag.” Samira and a majority of her Arab American Muslim peers believed, with reason, that their actions were often read as representative of all Arabs and Muslims. Many Arab and South Asian Muslim youth living in the U.S. today must constantly combat the widespread belief that they are dangerous enemies, and must find ways to assert their rights as members of this society. At the same time, they are cognizant of the impact of U.S. foreign policy on the countries from which they or their families migrated and they are often critical of these policies (Abu El-Haj, 2007; Maira, 2004). Samira’s words suggest the ways that, in contemporary times, belonging and citizenship are no simple matter.

In this article, I examine how the perspectives and experiences of Arab American youth from immigrant communities can help educators think about what it means to teach young people to become active participants in the social, civic, and political spheres within and across the boundaries of nation-states. Arab American youths’ perspectives are reflective of the transnational nature of their life experiences, as well as the unfortunate ways they have been positioned as enemy-outsiders to the U.S. in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Listening closely to the experiences and perspectives of these young people yields concrete implications for designing citizenship education that reflects the changing nature of belonging and citizenship. I propose that we stop thinking about citizenship primarily in relation to national identifications and begin to see it as a set of critical *practices*—practices that give young people the tools to understand

structural inequalities and work for social change within and across the boundaries of nation-states.

Citizenship Education in an era of transnational migration

Transnational migration patterns are reconfiguring the modern world and reshaping the contours of nation-states. Although today's global migration is not an unprecedented phenomenon, new technologies that facilitate the movement of information, goods, and peoples across borders have reshaped the capacity that people have to stay physically and emotionally connected to the places they have left. Immigrant communities often maintain psychological, cultural, and economic ties to multiple nation-states. This new reality requires that we reconsider the meaning and practice of citizenship education in light of what belonging and citizenship mean for young people growing up in today's world.

Although transnational migration has dramatically changed the contexts for citizenship education in our schools, the models of citizenship education that dominate U.S. schools do not reflect this new reality. Most existing frameworks for citizenship education focus on civic literacy (teaching facts about U.S. history, government, and geography), patriotic identity, and teaching the liberal virtue of tolerance through learning the skills and dispositions necessary for deliberation, cooperation, and decision-making (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). These models often emphasize individual responsibility as a key component of citizenship, rather than attending to collective action as a means to address the problems and possibilities of democratic life (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Moreover, dominant frameworks ignore questions of identity and belonging and fail to consider how they affect an individual's

ability to be fully included in society and also influence her or his capacity and desire to take up the mantle of active democratic participation (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Abu El-Haj, 2007; Banks, 2004; Castles, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Rubin, 2007.) Moreover, these models do not question the premise that rights should be bequeathed to those who hold national citizenship, failing to address contemporary “facts on the ground.” As more and more people live lives across the boundaries of nation-states, we may need more inclusive models that help *all* people realize economic, civil, social, political, and human rights (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Abu El-Haj, 2007; Bosniak, 2006; Soysal, 1998). In what follows, the perspectives of Arab American youth from immigrant communities suggest how our practices of citizenship education can, and indeed must, transform to reflect the changing meaning of belonging in the modern era.

Research with Arab American youth from immigrant communities

Since 2002, I have been conducting a multi-site, qualitative study of 1.5 and second generation Arab youth from immigrant communities living in and around a major U. S. city.¹ In this work, I have acted as a researcher, educator, and activist. The post September 11, 2001, context led me, as a member of the Arab American community, to interweave these multiple roles as integral to my research. As I interviewed Arab American youth and observed them in school, I became active in co-creating, with youth and other Arab American adults, community spaces in which they could collectively dialogue, study, and respond to the political and cultural discourses and policies that were framing their communities. In this article, I draw on what I have learned from this research to explore new forms of citizenship education that focus on critical practices

through which young people can learn tools for becoming active members of local and global communities.

Arab American Youth Perspectives

Citizenship and belonging

Although citizenship education is usually premised on the idea that citizenship and a sense of national belonging go hand in hand, for Arab American youth in my research, belonging and citizenship are not equivalent terms. For them, citizenship marks the myriad rights that legal status confers on them and their families. Arab American youth highly valued U.S. citizenship for the economic, political, and social rights that it entailed. For Palestinian American youth, in particular, direct experience with the harsh realities of what it means to live under Israeli military occupation without citizenship heightened appreciation for the importance of democratic citizenship that guarantees certain basic rights.

Citizenship entailed several important functions for these young people and their families. First, it facilitated economic opportunities that were often unavailable “back home” and helped them support families in the Middle East who faced extreme financial hardships. A second important function of citizenship was to guarantee social rights (especially the right to an education). Social rights refer to a broad range of rights that guarantee citizens minimum standards for economic security, well-being, and social inclusion, such as equal educational opportunity, and entitlements to health and other welfare services (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Castles & Davidson, 2000; Marshall, 1950/1998). Many students appreciated the opportunities afforded by U.S. public education. Finally, these Arab American youth described the importance of U.S.

citizenship for guaranteeing political and civil rights (see Castles & Davidson, 2000; Marshall, 1950/1998) that were often difficult to exercise in the countries from which they came. At the same time, they were concerned about the ways that the “war on terror” was threatening rights—particularly of Muslims—that they believed the U.S. had a responsibility to uphold (Akram & Johnson, 2004; Murray, 2004; Volpp, 2002).

Arab American students understood citizenship to be related to rights; however, they often felt a sense of connection and affiliation to a national identity different from that of the United States. Some Arab American youth clearly distinguished their national identity from their citizenship status. In the story about the Pledge of Allegiance that begins this article, Samira’s words exemplify an idea expressed by many Arab American youth. Having U.S. citizenship is not the same as being “American.” In fact, asked to describe herself, Samira began an interview with the words, “I am from Palestine.” Samira was born in the U.S., and, with the exception of a visit as a two-year old, she had not spent time in Palestine. However, growing up in a community with ongoing ties to Palestine, Samira felt a strong sense of connection to what she called her “homeland.” Adam, who lived a majority of his eighteen years in his family’s West Bank village, described a difference between *being* Palestinian and *having* U.S. citizenship. “I’m an Arab, *Falastini* [Palestinian] Arab. I got an American citizen[ship]. I was born here, but my home, it’s not here.” Hani, a Lebanese American boy who spends summers in Beirut, described his relationship to Lebanon, “I feel like I’m home there, more than I am in America sometimes because everyone understands the —our customs, I guess.” As members of transnational communities—communities that maintain ties through economic remittances, constant communication, satellite television, and recurrent

travel— Hani, Samira, Adam, and many other Arab American youth felt they belonged to a national community that was different from the one in which they held citizenship. Importantly, I am distinguishing here between cultural/ethnic and national identities. It was not simply that the Palestinian or Lebanese youth felt culturally connected to their “homelands”; they also identified with the political struggles of the nations from which they came.

Other youth experienced more fluid and complex relationships of belonging. In a video-poem, Amal, an Egyptian-American, expressed this complexity as follows:

An Egyptian-American, the long division in my life. I travel to my
homeland yet there is a border. An outsider looking in . . . In America,
English is my native tongue, yet there is still a difference. An outsider
looking in . . . I am an Egyptian-American. Will I ever belong? Will this
boundary ever be broken?

Amal’s story highlights the richness and challenges of forging a sense of belonging in transnational contexts. She describes her “homeland” as Egypt even as she speaks of English as her “native tongue.” She straddles two societies and in each, feels a sense of separation marked by differences in clothing, religious traditions, social customs, and political convictions. Whereas her final questions ring with some longing for resolution, they also suggest the ways that, in today’s world, navigating belonging frequently entails developing one’s sense of identity in relation to multiple nation-states.

Experiencing the contradictions of democracy

If the boundary that Amal described was partly an outcome of the conditions of modern global migration patterns, it also resulted from the contradictions between the

promises of U.S. democratic equality and experiences of marginalization in this society. Overall, the youth with whom I worked felt fortunate that their families had been relatively unharmed after September 11, 2001, given the widespread attacks on Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities across the country (Ahmad, 2002; Ibish, 2003; 2008; Volpp, 2002). However, they shared myriad stories about harassment in public places, “random” stops by police and at airports and borders, and confrontations with teachers and fellow students that continued long after September 11, 2001. Samia, a fourteen-year old Palestinian-American, told the following story:

My grandmother wears a headdress and we went to Walmart one day and this lady refused to help her. This associate, the Walmart associate. And it just made me so mad. And so I got really, really mad and I went to the manager. And I was like, “This lady won’t help my grandmother and she’s just racist and it makes me so mad.” And he’s like, “Well, then just leave.” And we just had to leave because no one would help her.

Students told numerous stories of explicit discrimination directed at their families. These experiences continually reinforced the idea that Arab and Muslim identities are incompatible with American identity.

Sadly, for many, school was the primary place in which they learned this lesson. Peers were often the source of this message. For example, Zayd, a Palestinian American, recounted how students tried to incite fights with Arab youth in his school immediately after September 11, 2001:

They would say, “Oh, you come to this school thinking like it’s over?

You’re going to bomb the towers and then sit here? Get the hell out of this school. Dirty animals.” And then that would start a fight.

In hallways, classrooms and playgrounds, Arab American youth across the U.S. have, since September 11, 2001, continually confronted beliefs that Arabs and Muslims are terrorists and enemy-aliens (Ibish, 2008).

The most distressing stories that young people in my research told involved teachers who either failed to address peer harassment or, even more egregiously, actively participated in similar behavior (see also, Ibish, 2008). For example, one girl reported that a teacher told her to take off her headscarf or face a disciplinary sanction, while another described a teacher who told her, “You look like a disgrace in that thing [headscarf].” At the start of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a Palestinian student reported witnessing her teacher yell at an Iraqi boy, “Go back to where you come from.” In multiple contexts, Arab American youth in my research received messages that they and their communities did not belong to this society.

These myriad experiences in schools and public spaces led some to fear that the privileges of citizenship were tenuous for members of their community. Long after September 11, 2001, some Arab American youth discussed the possibility that their communities might be rounded up *en masse* or expelled from the U.S. Given the history of Japanese internment during World War II, some students felt this was a plausible threat. Moreover, the detention of many Arabs and Muslims after September 11, 2001, created a context of uncertainty that made

some young people like Adam worry, “Maybe they’re going to kick all Arabs from America. Go back home!” For Adam and many of his peers, contemporary politics and policies raised questions about their membership in U.S. society and their capacity to exercise fully their rights as citizens. (see Akram & Johnson, 2004; Moore, 1999; Murray, 2004; Volpp, 2002). It is important, then, to understand that, for young Arab Americans from immigrant communities, the sense that they are not “American” and that they do not belong here is partly an outcome of the position in which their communities have been placed in relation to the current “war on terror.”

Contentious Politics

Another source of Arab American youths’ conflicted sense of belonging and citizenship derived from political perspectives, on subjects ranging from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that diverged from those that dominate the U.S. media and political sphere (see also, Ibish, 2008).

Arab American youth with whom I worked were frequently critical of U.S. foreign policy, particularly in relation to the war in Iraq. Leila, an Iraqi American, puzzled through the rationale for the war as follows:

It’s all in the best interest of the U.S., their decision. I mean with the war it’s all like, “We’re restoring freedom.” And the execution of it now is terrible. And you look back and you’re like, Why didn’t the U.S. help Rwanda and other countries? Because they can’t benefit out of it. It’s crazy because the U.S. all of a sudden cares about the freedom of the Iraqi

people? But why? Like they say it's all freedom, but they wouldn't have cared if there was no oil that they could get something out of.

Leila, who was in close contact with relatives in Baghdad, was skeptical about U.S. claims that supported the war in Iraq on the ground of democratic goals. Through travel and residency, personal communication, and access to Arab media sources, a majority of Arab American youth in this study, maintained strong connections with the economic, social, and political struggles in the Middle East, and, as a result were often critical of the role the U.S. played in that region. For many youth, this deep sense of connection led them to act in support of these struggles by, for example, seeking opportunities to educate the U.S. public, or raising money for humanitarian relief in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, my interviews with teachers and students revealed that a majority of these teachers viewed Arab American students' political commitments as problematic, and indicative of both an insufficient allegiance to the United States and an alliance with terrorism. This stance often led teachers to make unwarranted assumptions about their Arab American students. Moreover, rather than engage Arab American students in constructive dialogue about contentious political issues, a majority of their teachers often avoided or actively combated the positions these young people expressed. In a majority of cases, there appeared to be a difference between teachers' expectations that citizenship should be aligned with national allegiance and Arab American students' affiliations and political commitments that reflected their experiences as members of transnational communities. Although fortunately there are U.S. teachers designing and teaching thoughtful curriculum about the "war on terror" (see for example, *Rethinking Schools*, 2006) my research—echoing the findings of larger studies (Ibish, 2008)—suggests that,

since September 11, 2001, multi-faceted and critical perspectives have come under attack in schools across the country.

Focusing citizenship education around critical practices for democratic engagement

In this final section, I ask how listening to the voices of Arab American youth can help educators re-imagine citizenship education to account for and learn from the experiences and perspectives of these communities. Global migration trends are challenging notions of citizenship that depend on affiliation with and assimilation to a national identity. Many people hold multilayered affiliations across the borders of nation-states, and as a result of this sense of affiliation, they may continue to be engaged with struggles for the rights of people living elsewhere. For many young people, transnationalism shapes their identities, political sensibilities, and civic and political participation both in this society and on a global stage. In this changing world, citizenship may be better described as a guarantor of rights than a marker of national identity. That is, transnational communities suggest a need to disentangle citizenship rights from the expectations for assimilation to a particular national identity.

Unfortunately, for a majority of Arab American youth in my research, their education did not help them explore the complexity of belonging and citizenship, nor did it offer opportunities for learning active democratic participation. Indeed, their educational experiences often reinforced the idea that *being Arab* and *being American* were incompatible identities, thus exacerbating the challenges of belonging *and* participation for these young people. In a sense, the kind of citizenship that was on offer was one that Arab American youth found difficult, if not impossible, to take up. It was

hard to comply with the implicit and explicit requirements that as a condition of belonging, they pledge allegiance to the United States; remain uncritical of U.S. foreign policy; or choose between their identities as Arabs and Muslims, and as Americans. As a result, many were pessimistic about their capacity to act upon and make a difference in this society—to participate as active democratic citizens.

Nevertheless, Arab American youth in this study were anything but civically and politically disengaged. Through speech, writing and film, they spoke back to the dominant, negative images of their families and their communities. Many tried to contribute productively to alleviate suffering in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. However, for the most part, they learned the tools for civic and political participation in out-of-school spaces, rather than within their school's citizenship education curriculum. In fact, educators concerned with transforming youth civic engagement and citizenship practices often work in out of school sites to promote this work (see for example, Abu El-Haj, 2009; Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, & Rodriguez-Muniz, 2006; Kwon, 2006). While these out-of-school spaces are key sites for reinvigorating youth civic and political engagement, schools still remain the primary site for incorporating youth from immigrant communities in their new societies.

Implications: Transforming citizenship education in our schools

The question then is: How can we re-imagine citizenship education *in our schools* to encourage these young people to become full participants in their multiple worlds? A key implication of this research is that citizenship education should focus on cultivating practices of active citizenship that help them to build a strong sense of social belonging

and civic engagement (see for example, Abu El-Haj, 2009; Levinson, 2005; Rubin, 2007; Torre & Fine, 2006; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Cultivating practices of active citizenship means helping young people investigate and respond to key issues that affect their communities, particularly in ways that support them to examine the structural inequalities that engender these issues (see for examples, Abu El-Haj, 2009; Cammarota, 2008; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008; Roberts, Bell & Murphy, 2008; Rubin & Hayes, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

In my own work, for example, I have co-taught video-workshops for teenagers at an Arab American community arts organization. The three-week video-workshops are organized around a theme and begin with an intensive investigation of that theme. One summer, we examined the history of U.S. migration and immigration, connecting this history to the personal migration stories of the participants and their families. Using the arts as a primary medium, we explored key issues, including the American Dream, the social construction of race, citizenship policies, and the contemporaneous Congressional legislative proposal on immigration (HR 4437, passed 12/16/05). We also explored possibilities for social and political action, focusing on historical and contemporary examples of resistance to unjust policies, while also asking participants to consider times when they took a stance for justice in their everyday lives.

After a week of study, the participants chose a theme from which to develop a film that spoke back to dominant images that cast Arab and Muslim immigrant communities as a threat to the U.S. Through stories and images, they seeded alternate narratives about their communities. As the youth listened to each other, interviewed their family and community members, and related these stories to what they were learning

about U.S. history and contemporary immigration policies, they developed social and political critiques that linked deeply entrenched structural inequalities to their local experiences. Importantly, through this work, the participants learned useful skills (such as research, critique, and representation) through which they could actively respond to a problem affecting their community. This represents a kind of democratic citizenship education which Levinson (2005) has aptly defined as, “efforts to educate members of social groups to imagine their social belonging and exercise their participation as democratic citizens” (p. 336).

Despite some public handwringing about the political apathy of today’s youth, there is ample evidence that many young people are seeking ways to be actively engaged in the civic, social, and political lives of their local and global communities (Abu El-Haj, 2009; Cammarota, 2008; Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, & Rodriguez-Muniz, 2006; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008; Kwon, 2006; Rubin, under review). Too often, however, schools have put citizenship education on the back burner. This is a critical time to refocus on citizenship education as central to the mission of public schools. However, in doing so, we must be prepared to redefine these efforts in ways that account for the new realities of globalization and transnational communities. Participation and critical engagement, rather than a sense of national identification, may in the end prove a stronger base for developing engaged and active young citizens working for a more just and peaceful future for nations across the globe.

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Resources for teachers

- 1) Bell, L. A., Roberts, R. A., Irani, K., & Murphy, B. (2008). *The storytelling project curriculum: Learning about race and racism through storytelling and the arts*. Available at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/barnard/education/stp/getpdf.html>.
Using storytelling and the arts, this curriculum offers teachers frameworks and activities for exploring race and racism with their students. This curriculum is organized around stories in order to “build a bridge between the sociological and abstract dimensions and the individually lived, personal dimensions on which racism functions” (p.9).
- 2) Bigelow, B & Peterson, B. (2002). *Rethinking globalization: Teaching for justice in an unjust world*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools Press. This book is a rich compendium of information, activities and resources to aid teachers in developing curriculum to educate about globalization, particularly in relation to consumer and labor markets. The articles focus attention on the interconnected nature of today’s world and the impact we have on people in far-reaching places.
- 3) Cho, E. H., Arguelles Paz Y Puente, Louie, M. C. Y., & Khokha, S. (2004). *Bridge: Building a race and immigration dialogue in the global economy*. Berkeley, CA: Inkworks Press. This book integrates an exploration of U.S. immigration histories, with contemporary migration patterns, human rights and globalization. It offers a wide array of resources and activities to help educators address these issues.

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