

*The Development of the American Identity
and Education's Role as It Further Develops*

By Scott Jones for Ed Psych 6217
29 November 2006

As it concerns the Western democracies, America's development has not followed the same course as the other traditional powers. Not only was America the first of these powers to write a constitution based on equality of men before the law, but the conditions of settlement in America created a unique situation not replicated among the Old World powers. This is not to blame the Old World Powers for their inability to create the conditions that allowed democracy to flourish as it did in America and become copied by other nations. Instead, America's situation and variables allowed it to develop a distinct place in the development of modern democracy. This situation allowed for the creation of the unique American identity. It is this identity that allowed America to create a government without noble privilege, to settle a vast land, to grow into an economic world power, to incorporate millions of immigrants into its society and to become the model other nations use as they attempt to incorporate democratic ideals into their governments. This was not an easy development. It developed because it was necessary as America developed as a nation. It has helped define what America stands for today. If Americans want it to, the unique American identity will continue to develop and define what America becomes in its future.

Samuel Huntington (2004) identifies America's core culture as including "the Christian religion, Protestant values and moralism, a work ethic, the English language, British traditions of law, justice and the limits of government power, and a legacy of European art, literature, philosophy and music." From this culture, Huntington argues

that the American settlers developed “the American Creed with its principles of liberty, equality, individualism, representative government and private property.” Together, this creates what Huntington calls the Anglo-Protestant identity of America. Until 1890, according to Huntington, America was a “settler’s nation.” This is an important development for American, however, a complete understanding this settlement is critical to understanding the American identity. Further complicating any discussion on the development of the American identity, American historians do not completely agree on how this identity actually developed. For many historians they subscribe to the “Frontier Thesis” of Frederick Jackson Turner (1920). Other historians follow the ideas presented by Richard Wade (1959) that America developed as its urban areas developed in the West.

The Turner thesis dominated American thoughts about the development of the American democracy, which was the core of the American identity. The culture that developed on the frontier defined what America became because the frontier existed at the time of colonial settlement and throughout most of the nineteenth century. Turner argues that the harsh conditions of the frontier developed a strong individual work ethic in Americans. By noting that those who did not possess the required effort died from the conditions, those frontiersmen that survived passed their successful work ethic on to their own children. In addition, the power of the government was limited due to the vastness of the frontier. Therefore, those who succeeded in the American frontier did so because of their abilities. According to Turner, the American governmental principles of equality, private property and liberty develop because of the frontier.

Just a few decades after Turner's famous paper, Richard Wade argues that the "frontier thesis," while a valid interpretation of America's development, ignores other important aspects of the frontier. According to Wade, the cities of America provided the key to America's settlement of the West. It was in the cities and towns, according to this argument, where Americans practiced their Christian religious traditions. The cities tamed the excesses of the frontier mentality. Cities preserved the Old World traditions of law and justice by outlawing dueling and establishing a judicial presence. In addition, early American cities encouraged a sense of community as individuals dealt with the harsh conditions of the frontier. As with most arguments, the best interpretation of the history is complex mixing of both sides. In fact, when the Turner thesis and the Wade response combine, Huntington's definition of the Anglo-Protestant national identity of America appears.

America's identity is a unique development, especially when compared to the development of national identities in Europe, from where most Americans came. Whereas, the American identity arose from a common threat, the conditions of the frontier, many European identities have developed differently. While the common threat theme exists in the development of European identities, it is from threats from other European states. It is from these threats, European nations developed. Historian Michael Howard argues that nations cannot be born without a common enemy that develops into a state of war (Huntington, 2004). The nation of France develops out of the Hundred Years War with Britain and then the modern French nation develops from the French Revolution and Napoleon (Wright, 1987). Germany develops out of the conflict with France in the 1860s (Merriman, 1996). However, it is this development that leads to the

dangers of a common national identity, nationalism. While many Europeans developed an identity based on their place of residence and their place within feudal society, the development of nationalism forced identity with a much larger entity. At its extreme, national identity in the form of nationalism contributes to a sense of superiority over other groups of people (Merriman, 1996). While the frontier in America allowed the American identity to develop without a sense of location at its core, the tendency to nationalism did develop.

American nationalism has had some of the same negative aspects as European nationalism. American nationalism is the reason for the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century, the Mexican War of the 1840s, the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the initial resistance to immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the development of public education in America during the early parts of the twentieth century allowed for the assimilation of immigrants into America and began to curb the excesses of American nationalism (Tindall and Shi, 1999). However, the American educational system came under attack in the 1960s. Critics argued that education indoctrinated American kids into a belief that the American system was superior to all others even though it had tremendous flaws like segregation and a history of exploitation of people (McClellan, 1999). This was a natural reaction to the excesses of nationalism throughout the world during WWII and the excesses of American nationalism during the development of the Cold War in the 1950s. Unfortunately, the critics of American education in the 1960s and 1970s did not differentiate between indoctrination for national superiority and educating in the spirit of the national identity.

This is an important distinction. The Anglo-Protestant identity of America described by Huntington does not have a tendency toward nationalism and its excesses. The American creed of “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness,” coupled with traditions of common law, justice and limited government cannot lead to nationalism if it is done properly. This will mean that American should never develop a sense of nationalism, but the country must stay true to its identity to ensure these idealistic goals remain attainable. Developing without a sense of nationalism does not mean American is destined to fail as Robert Kaplan observed (Huntington, 2004). Instead, it means America will not exist as a nation in its classic sense, but instead as a nation with a shared identity among all people that own the government. If America can accomplish this, it will truly reserve its place as a unique people in the world. As this is a worthy goal, several obstacles remain for America to develop this sense of country without nationalism.

As American moved away from teaching civic values and customs in the 1960s and 1970s, America began a new wave of immigration. Schools were not in a place to foster the development of these new Americans into the Anglo-Protestant identity of America, because the teaching of this culture was criticized as indoctrination. Even though these new Hispanic immigrants came to take advantages of the riches in America, America was not prepared to educate the new Americans into the Anglo-Protestant identity. Huntington recognizes this development and outlines four basic paths the nation might take in the future as this immigration crisis develops. The possible responses, according to Huntington, are a continued diversity emphasis, a white nativism response to immigration, bifurcation, or effective assimilation of the immigrants into the Anglo-Protestant culture.

Huntington first possible outcome for the future of the American identity is a continuation of the diversity emphasis. This is not multi-culturalism. This is, however, a positive development, that if it continues, Huntington argues will make race a non-factor in discussion in America. While America still has a long way to go toward developing an Anglo-Protestant culture that excludes race as a factor. This has developed as far as African-American incorporation into the national identity during the last fifty years in the nation. While no one can argue the black and white races have a shared identity, the trend continues as the races merge into one national identity. Huntington's examples of Colin Powell, Bryant Gumbel and Jackie Robinson paving the way into acceptance for African-Americans by the larger culture are encouraging signs of what can happen as Americans recognize the contribution to the American identity those will different backgrounds can give if allowed to. If this trend begins to incorporate the important contributions of recent Hispanic immigrants, the Anglo-Protestant culture will continue to define the true American identity.

The second possible outcome that Huntington describes for the future of the Anglo-Protestant American identity is a white nativism response to recent developments. This outcome must be avoided because it is a classic nationalism response to a perceived threat. As far as America has advanced in terms of racial unity, some of the policies to achieve this have been controversial to those already defined by the Anglo-Protestant culture. For example, affirmative action laws designed to help African-Americans and other minorities achieve economic success that was closed to them until the 1970s have been attacked by white nativists as reverse discrimination (Tindall and Shi, 1999). Identifying the common opponent, in this case the opposing race, has helped develop a

unity of certain parts of the country around race. Anyone promoting an anti-diversity platform will have political success among white males in the South. Most recently, white nativism has become active in the immigration debate concerning the movement of Mexicans over the mostly unguarded border between Mexico and the United States. Of course, if this white nationalism trend continues, the ability to develop a common Anglo-Protestant identity among all Americans cannot succeed.

The third outcome identified by Huntington as possible as it concerns the Anglo-Protestant culture is the bifurcation of the culture. This outcome leads to the development of no single national identity. Instead, the new Hispanic immigrants form their own identity within the United States, African-Americans form their own identity and white America has its own identity. This development calls for two languages, Spanish and English, which breaks the Anglo-Protestant identity at its core belief in a single national language. In an almost Hispanic nationalist movement, many Hispanic leaders have become advocates for this development in an almost Hispanic nativism movement. Just as white nativism cannot continue, this trend to Hispanic nativism has the same flaws for the development of a common Anglo-Protestant culture.

The final outcome developed by Huntington for the future of the American identity is the assimilation into the culture of immigrants. Just as immigrants have assimilated into the American throughout the course of American history, the Anglo-Protestant culture must continue to do this if America hopes to move into the future with the same core values it has existed with in the past. However, assimilation is not a one-way street. The new immigrants cannot be indoctrinated into the culture. It must be give-and-take. Just as the Irish immigrants eventually contributed certain aspects of

Catholicism into the Anglo-Protestant culture of American in the early parts of the twentieth century, new immigrants must be allowed to contribute to the positive development of the larger Anglo-Protestant culture. If this does not occur, then bifurcation is the path the culture's future will take.

The best possible outcome for the single Anglo-Protestant identity of the United States is that all groups come together and continue to define the culture that leads to future success for the country as a whole. While this sounds utopian, it is not as hard as it might sound. In fact, a lot of the work to accomplish has already been done. All that needs to happen is for schools to adopt the responsibility to develop good and competent citizens, which educates for all the traits at the core of the Anglo-Protestant identity of America.

Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2004) outline the basic components of what makes a good democratic citizen. They develop three types of good citizens in the following chart.

Kinds of Citizens		
Personally responsible citizen	Participatory citizen	Justice-oriented citizen
<i>Description</i>		
Acts responsibly in his/her community Works and pays taxes Obeys laws Recycles, gives blood Volunteers to lend a hand in times of crisis	Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment Knows how government agencies work Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks	Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice Knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change
<i>Sample action</i>		
Contributes food to a food drive	Helps to organize a food drive	Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes
<i>Core assumptions</i>		
To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community.	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures.	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time.

The traits of each of the types of citizens encompasses the Anglo-Protestant culture described by Huntington. Values and moralism, along with work ethic, respect for the law are found in the personally responsible citizen. Understanding of representative government, core Christian principles and the limits of government help are Anglo-Protestant culture aspects of the participatory citizen in Westheimer and Kahne's work. The justice-oriented citizen has the Anglo-Protestant traits of liberty, equality and justice. Therefore, the good citizen in the Anglo-Protestant identity of America is a hybrid of all three types of citizens. If citizenship education is to be done with an eye to the long-term success of American identity, then it must address all three types of citizens and merge them into one citizen.

In order to do this, a comprehensive look at education must take place. Educating for all three types of good citizens will create a competent one. John Patrick and Thomas Vontz (2001) outline the outcomes of effective citizenship education that will guarantee the development of the Anglo-Protestant culture in the following chart.

COMPONENTS OF EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP IN A DEMOCRACY

- 1. KNOWLEDGE OF CITIZENSHIP AND GOVERNMENT IN A DEMOCRACY (CIVIC KNOWLEDGE)**
 - a. Concepts/principles on the substance of democracy
 - b. Issues about the meaning and implementation of core ideas
 - c. Constitutions and institutions of representative democratic government
 - d. Organization and functions of democratic institutions
 - e. Practices of democratic citizenship and the roles of citizens
 - f. Contexts of democracy: cultural, social, political, and economic
 - g. History of democracy in particular states and throughout the world
 - 2. INTELLECTUAL SKILLS OF CITIZENSHIP IN A DEMOCRACY (COGNITIVE CIVIC SKILLS)**
 - a. Identifying and describing phenomena (events and issues) of political/civic life
 - b. Analyzing and explaining phenomena (events and issues) of political/civic life
 - c. Evaluating, taking, and defending positions on public events and issues
 - d. Thinking critically about conditions of political/civic life.
 - e. Thinking constructively about how to improve political/civic life
 - 3. PARTICIPATORY SKILLS OF CITIZENSHIP IN A DEMOCRACY (PARTICIPATORY CIVIC SKILLS)**
 - a. Interacting with other citizens to promote personal and common interests
 - b. Monitoring public events and issues
 - c. Deliberating and making decisions about public policy issues
 - d. Influencing policy decisions on public issues
 - e. Implementing policy decision on public issues
 - f. Taking action to improve political/civic life
 - 4. DISPOSITIONS OF CITIZENSHIP IN A DEMOCRACY (CIVIC DISPOSITIONS)**
 - a. Promoting the common good
 - b. Affirming the common and equal humanity and dignity of each person
 - c. Respecting, protecting, and using rights possessed equally by each person
 - d. Participating responsibly in the political/civic life of the community
 - e. Respecting, protecting, and practicing government by consent of the people
 - f. Supporting and practicing civic virtues
-

These are the outcomes, but the question of how to accomplish these goals remains. Once again, scholars have done much of the work already. In order to accomplish these goals, a comprehensive citizenship education that develops strong character is the education schools must do in order to guarantee the strong Anglo-Protestant. While there is some tension between the citizenship education and character education supporters, Wolfgang Althof and Marvin Berkowitz (2006) attempt to bridge the gap between the two fields. It is necessary for this to occur in order to aid in the continued development of the American identity as defined by Huntington. Comprehensive character education with service learning along with strong experiential learning in democratic environments central to citizenship education will help produce good and competent citizens that will continue the national identity that has helped develop America into a leading nation of the world.

Along these exact lines, the main argument in Thomas Lickona and Matt Davidson's (2005) *Smart and Good High Schools* develops perfectly the model of using character and citizenship education in order to educate for the Anglo-Protestant culture. The combination of moral character traits and performance character traits by the researchers is a mixing of the traits of the Anglo-Protestant culture identified by Huntington. In addition, Lickona and Davidson argue that one of the important pieces that lead to this positive development in adolescents is civic education that combines learning of government, service learning and positive democratic experiences. While it is not the only model that could guarantee the future of the American identity, the format of this school reform could end the white nativism and bifurcation movements alive in America today.

If educational models like *Smart and Good High Schools* had been in place throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the crisis facing the American identity might have been avoided. Hispanic leaders would have not felt the need to rebel against the “whiteness” of the American power culture that tended toward nationalist indoctrination. The evils of nationalist indoctrination, however, are not present in the citizenship and/or character education models proposed by Westheimer, Kahne, Patrick, Vontz, Althoff, Berkowitz, Lickona, Davidson and many others. The reactions against such practice in the 1960s and 1970s were natural and beneficial. However, nothing of substance replaced it, therefore allowing each individual to create their own national identity within their own minds.

As it has been shown, it is possible to develop a national identity without falling into the evils of nationalism indoctrination. At times, educators can easily cross the thin line between educating for national identity and indoctrination for nationalism. After September 11, 2001, the line became blurred in America for some time. However, the good and competent citizen teaching others how to become good and competent citizens will be able to identify the line and make sure they remain focused on the educating for the national identity. This means every educator must be a good and competent citizen before they can begin teaching others about becoming a part of the Anglo-Protestant cultural heritage of America. In other words, every educator must be a good and competent American living in an Anglo-Protestant culture that truly upholds the American Creed.

REFERENCES

- Althof, W. & Berkowitz, M. (2006). *Moral Education and Character Education: Their Relationship*
- Huntington, S.P. (2004). *Who are we? The challenge to America's national identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Lickona, T. & Davidson, M. (2005). *Smart and Good High Schools*. Washington D.C.: Character Education Partnership.
- Merriman, J. (1996). *A History of Modern Europe*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- McClellan, B. E. (1999). *Moral Education in America*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Patrick, J.J. & Vontz, T.S. (2001). Components of education for democratic citizenship in the preparation of social studies teachers. In J.J. Patrick & R.S. Leming (Eds.) *Civic learning in teacher education. Volume 1: Principles and Practices of democracy in the education of social studies teachers*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC and Civitas, 39-63.
- Turner, F.J. (1920). *The Frontier in American History*. Dover: Dover Publications, new Edition 1996.
- Tindall, G.B., & Shi, D.E. (1999). *America: A Narrative History*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Wade, R.C. (1959). *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830*. Champagne: University of Illinois Press, new edition 1996.
- Westheimer, J. & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42, 237-269.
- Wright, G. (1987). *France in Modern Times*. New York: W.W. Norton.