

Education for War, What's It Good For?

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Avi Mintz's "Sparta, Athens, and the Surprising Roots of Common Schooling" is an insightful and rich work that contains many provocative ideas about the Greek roots of common schooling.¹ In this response, I will focus on one implication of Mintz's well-reasoned argument—an implication that arises from his excellent work but is unaddressed in his paper. The implication goes something like this. The strength of the Spartan state was made possible by tightly controlled and administered common education wherein the good life was defined as the life of a warrior. Athenians co-opted the practice of common education, i.e. public schooling, but left the good life open to interpretation. What's laudable about the Spartans, the commonness of their education, is, therefore, also problematic insofar as the communal nature of Spartan education is the result of a predetermined commitment to study war.

The question is, to what extent is the study of war related to the establishment of formative common schooling? The Spartans explicitly studied war. The objective of schooling in Sparta was to train obedient, courageous, respectful and self-controlled citizen-soldiers. Spartans did not celebrate men who challenged authority or questioned the laws. They celebrated men who were brave in battle and obeyed commands. By contrast, in Athens the objective was to provide a general and not always communal education that equipped *all* men to participate in the assembly and *some* to be soldiers.² Educated and celebrated Athenians were men who challenged bad laws, who asked good questions, and who argued their case. It is much easier to imagine, design, and carry out education in the Spartan sense because there is only one end. War provides the rationale for forming Spartan men of a certain sort.

On my view, education *for* war is education for domination of citizens and the "Other" by the State. Aristotle is helpful here. Even though he finds much to praise about the Spartan system of education and is certainly not

opposed to domination in all cases, he reminds his readers that education for a single end always entails domination. He states, “... anywhere the laws have to some extent a single aim, it is always domination. So, in Sparta and Crete the educational system and most of the laws are set up for war.”⁷³ Aristotle supports the way Sparta’s shared political commitments make Spartan education a communal project—to the extent that his celebration of Spartan education reveals his misgivings about education in democracies.

When Aristotle celebrates Spartan education, he does so with disdain for cities that are careless about “allowing each person to live the way he wants.”⁷⁴ This is of course, similar to Plato’s critique of democracy in the *Republic* where Socrates likens democracy to “a supermarket of constitutions” and democratic cities to places with no requirement to rule or be ruled, “or to be at war when the others are, or at peace unless you happen to want it.”⁷⁵ Plato and Aristotle alike worry about the extent to which democratic cities generate too much variety in the type of good life one might choose to take up. Although their concerns differ in severity, both worry about the freedom of learning that tends to define democratic cities. For Aristotle, the preservation of a just state depends on the extent to which education is communal *and* suits a virtuous end. In Aristotle’s phrasing, “what one acts and or learns *for* makes a big difference.”⁷⁶

The point I want to make here echoes Aristotle’s warning that what one learns *for* matters. If Mintz is correct, and I think he is, that the Spartan practice of common schooling was eclipsed by the Athenian theory of common schooling, but that both ground the west’s understanding of the common school, then we must address the extent to which our understanding of common schooling is infected by *education for war and domination* as much as it is infused with a notion of *education for democratic citizenship* via liberal studies. Sparta’s success with communal education is unsurprising given the domination by the state of citizens to form citizen-soldiers whose expertise is war.

The father of the American common school, Horace Mann, was also concerned about common schooling and the study of war. In his *Lectures on Education*, Mann argues that unless the rising generation is educated in “strength and sobriety of intellect which shall dispel the insane illusions of martial glory;

and unless they shall be trained to the habitual exercise of those sentiments of universal brotherhood for the race ... ” war and war making will persist.⁷ As Mann saw it, education for killing produced nothing more than artful killers, while education for peace and “universal brotherhood” paved the way for the genuine renewal of society.⁸ In a reversal of Plato and Aristotle’s vision, Mann argues that education for democracy is the only sure way to establish a just society. Education for killing only makes more killers.

What Aristotle and Mann, and now, in this interesting paper, Avi Mintz, remind us of is that what we educate *for* matters. Although Spartan common schooling paved the way for our practice of common education in the west, we would be wise to pay attention to the fact that it was education for war. Perhaps there is something to lament in the eclipse of Spartan culture and education by Athens in the sense that education as formation was pushed aside in favor of education as learning. As Mintz has shown us, it is possible, after all, to educate for democratic citizenship and still view education as the formation of citizens who can communicate, live, and act with people who have different conceptions of the good life. However, teaching native-born boys how to, but also why they must, dominate all who are different from them, is not acceptable or suitable for pluralistic democracy such as the one in which we live.

The Spartans erected a system of common schooling deeply tied to the Spartan political community and their vision of the good life. The Athenians did not. Where the Spartans had common schooling the Athenians had individualized education in the liberal arts for those who were gifted or could pay. Although it’s tempting to trace all the ways in which contemporary common schooling in the United States is has followed Athens, Americans are no strangers to studying war. Not only has American education policy reflected the demands of the Cold War, the war on poverty and drugs, and now rampage school shootings, a war by the NRA on democratic life without guns, it rewards the study of war. American children do not live in barracks or band together to steal their meals like Spartan children may have done, but they do spend most of their waking hours together and often rush through shared meals. Moreover, the practice of studying war is a defining feature of American education. American children

are conditioned to move at the sound of a bell, raise their hand to speak, and seek permission to move and think. Obedience, check. They are told that good American's are self-reliant folks who "bootstrap" it to victory. Self-reliance, check. They often learn about the history of America by studying a series of battles and victories. Martial imagination, check.

Children who question school rules, or challenge the laws like the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, or student activists against gun violence in Chicago, are often demonized, ignored, and overlooked. If they get taken seriously it is because enough blood has been spilled to make ignoring their questions bad form. These children not only study war in the sense that they learn about American history as a series of battles or even in the sense that they are conditioned to move and dominate, they study death and gun violence. In school they practice active shooter drills and worry about what might happen if a classmate were to open fire. Urban children, like the young activists in Chicago, practice active shooter drills in school, and then traverse their blocks. For them gun violence threatens their walk home, to the corner store, and to swimming practice.

American education is riddled with stray bullets because American children have been studying war. Horace Mann was right. Aristotle was right. The ends matter. What we educate for matters. American schools have become war machines more worried about education for war, than education for pluralism, or democracy, or peace. Even though the Athenian theory of common schooling eclipsed the Spartan practice, they shared a culture of war that remains an integral part of schooling American citizens.

Education for war is education for domination of citizens and the "Other" by the state. Although education for war can form citizen soldiers who can both lead an army and tell a joke, it is not just or suitable for a plural democracy. Common education in a democracy such as ours could indeed be more common and more concerned with the formation of democratic citizens, but it must disengage from battle. Education for freedom and democracy will lead some to favor life with the lotus-eaters Plato fears and others to try out constitutions like coats, but this is preferable to education for war. One lesson

post-enlightenment thinking on democracy has taught us is that there is no harm in allowing folks to go their own way. Education for freedom is, in fact, the only solution for common education in a plural democracy.

1 This article is an invited response to Avi Mintz, “Sparta, Athens and the Surprising Roots of Common Schooling,” for *Philosophy of Education 2018*, ed. Megan Lavery (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019).

2 “All men” is qualified of course. Slaves and non-citizens were not allowed to participate in Athens’ governing democracy.

3 Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 1324b6-9.

4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd edition (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), 1080a24-29.

5 Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 557d-e.

6 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337b15-20.

7 Horace Mann, *Lectures on Education* (Boston, MA: Ide & Dutton, 1855), 242.

8 Mann, *Lectures on Education*, 246.