

Education and the Three Kinds of Citizens

Adapted from Westheimer and Kahne, 2004

The Personally Responsible Citizen

The personally responsible citizen acts responsibly in his/her community by, for example, picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, obeying laws, and staying out of debt. The personally responsible citizen contributes to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteers to help those less fortunate whether in a soup kitchen or a senior center. Programs that seek to develop personally responsible citizens hope to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work (Horace Mann, 1838; and currently proponents such as Lickona, 1993; Wynne, 1986).

Those in the character education movement frequently advance such perspectives. The Character Counts! Coalition, for example, advocates teaching students to “treat others with respect...deal peacefully with anger...be considerate of the feelings of others...follow the Golden Rule...use good manners” and so on (Character Counts!, 1996).

Other programs that seek to develop personally responsible citizens hope to nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer activities. As illustrated in the mission of the Points of Light Foundation, these programs hope to “help solve serious social problems” by “engag[ing] more people more effectively in volunteer service” (www.pointsoflight.org, April 2000).

The Participatory Citizen

Other educators see good citizens as those who actively participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national levels. We call this kind of citizen the participatory citizen. Proponents of this vision emphasize preparing students to engage in collective, community-based efforts. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government and community based organizations work and about the importance of planning and participating in organized efforts to care for those in need, for example, or in efforts to guide school policies. Skills associated with such collective endeavors—such as how to run a meeting—are also viewed as important (Newmann, 1975; also see Verba, et al., 1995 for an empirical analysis of the importance of such skills and activities).

While the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive. In the tradition of De Tocqueville, proponents of participatory citizenship argue that civic participation transcends particular community problems or opportunities. It also develops relationships, common understandings, trust, and collective commitments. Dewey (1916) put forward a vision of “Democracy as a Way of Life” and emphasized participation in collective endeavors. This perspective, like Benjamin Barber’s notion of “strong democracy,” adopts a broad notion of the political sphere – one in which citizens “with competing but overlapping interests can contrive to live together communally” (1984, 118).

The Justice Oriented Citizen

Our third image of a good citizen is, perhaps, the perspective that is least commonly pursued. Justice oriented educators argue that effective democratic citizens need opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social, economic, and political forces. We refer to this view as the justice oriented citizen because advocates of these priorities use rhetoric and analysis that calls explicit attention to matters of injustice and to the importance of pursuing social justice. The vision of the justice oriented citizen shares with the vision of the participatory citizen an emphasis on collective work related to the life and issues of the community. Its focus on responding to social problems and to structural critique make it somewhat different, however.

Building on perspectives like those of Freire and Shor noted earlier, educational programs that emphasize social change seek to prepare students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about social movements and how to effect systemic change (See, for example, Ayers, 1998; Bigelow and Diamond, 1988; Issac, 1995). That today's citizens are "bowling alone" (Putnam, 2000) would worry those focused on civic participation. Those who emphasize social justice, however, would worry more that when citizens do get together, they often fail to focus on root causes of problems. In other words, if participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food, justice oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.

Although educators aiming to promote justice oriented citizens may well employ curriculum that makes political issues more explicit than those who emphasize personal responsibility or participatory citizenship, the focus on social change and social justice does not imply an emphasis on particular political perspectives, conclusions, or priorities (The range of structural approaches for alleviating poverty that exist, for example, spans the political spectrum). Indeed, those working to prepare justice oriented citizens for a democracy do not aim to impart a fixed set of truths or critiques regarding the structure of the society. Rather, they work to engage students in informed analysis and discussion regarding social, political, and economic structures. They want students to consider collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address root causes of problems.

The nature of this discussion is of critical importance. As many theorists of democracy make clear, it is fundamentally important that the process respect the varied voices and priorities of citizens while considering the evidence of experts, the analysis of government leaders or the particular preferences of a given group or of an individual leader. Similarly, students must learn to weigh the varied opinions and arguments of fellow students and teachers. Since conceptions of the greater good will differ, justice oriented students must develop the ability to communicate with and learn from those who hold different perspectives. This is not to say that consensus is always the appropriate outcome. Educating justice oriented citizens also requires that they be prepared to effectively promote their goals as individuals and groups in sometimes contentious political arenas.

