

Scott Jones
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Foundations of Citizenship Education
Paper 1

Educating for the Good and Competent Citizen

The education of the American citizen requires the dedication to developing both a good and competent citizen. The National Council for the Social Studies, the discipline's largest interest group, has the motto "Creating Effective Citizens" (www.socialstudies.org, 2006). Of course, the question concerning the development of effective citizenship turns to "how to" educate children and adolescents so that they become citizens in a constitutional republic such as the United States of America. In order to understand this, it is necessary first to define good citizenship and then discuss how to foster this definition so that students in schools can enter American society as competent citizens.

The simplest definitions of good citizenship would be the place to start the discussion of good citizenship. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2004) define three types of citizens. The "personally-responsible citizen" is one that develops solid character traits such as honesty, responsibility and respect for the law as the important traits necessary for good citizenship. While every citizen in a civilized society needs these traits, unfortunately these traits are not enough for a complex civilization based on liberties and freedoms, on which many "Western democracies" are based. The reason is that even military dictatorships stress these as important traits for their citizens. In order for a fully functioning constitutional republic to progress, it must have citizens capable of much more.

The next type of citizen discussed by Westheimer and Kahne is the type “participatory citizen” that any republic must have in order to survive. This citizen not only sees themselves as possessing the good character traits of citizen, this person also believes understanding the structures of government, voting in elections and volunteering in the community are important traits of good citizens. Like the “personally responsible” citizen, this type of citizenship is also not enough for a fully functioning society like the United States. A person studying history need not go back far in history to find republics like the Weimar Republic of Germany that had citizens of this type and elected people that did great harm to civilization. For societies such as the United States to progress further, its citizens must have the ability to prevent such things as the election of the Nazis in 1933 Germany.

The third type of citizen defined by Westheimer and Kahne is the “justice-oriented” citizen. This type of citizen fights for the underprivileged in societies and will often be willing to suffer personal harm in their fight for justice. While this might sound great, sometimes this citizen can get so focused on their fight, they lose sight of the larger society and the means to create effective change. The attempts by feminists in the United States to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s were never able to put aside their feelings of women’s injustice throughout history to adequately debate and persuade the citizenry of the need for the amendment.

Each of the above types of citizens is a simple definition of good citizenship. While each has their positive traits, each also has their own shortcomings. Unfortunately, the result is that in order to be a “competent” citizen, one must master each of the types of good citizenship. In order for schools to graduate citizens capable of making a

positive impact in the complex American political structure, they must develop the personal responsibility skills, government participation skills and social justice skills of each student. It is a mission that takes a commitment, but one that schools can accomplish.

While liberals and conservatives often argue about the means to create the next generation of citizens, John Patrick and Thomas Vontz (2001) identify four basic components for educating students to become competent citizens. The beauty of their work is that it blends the personal/participatory priorities of the traditional conservatives with the participatory/social justice of the progressive liberals. The four components of educating for competent citizenship are knowledge of citizenship, intellectual skills of citizenship, participatory skills of citizenship, and dispositions of citizenship. Schools can accomplish these four components through a variety of ways, but the most comprehensive method that addresses all four components, plus many other positive developments, is a quality character education program.

All four of the Patrick and Vontz's traits are addressed in the comprehensive school reform plan of Thomas Lickona and Matt Davidson (2005). In the plan, the authors address character in two types. The performance character, which comprises the personal traits of respect, responsibility, hard work, etc, addresses the needs of a competent citizen to be self-respecting and participating in a community. In addition, Lickona and Davidson identify moral character as equally important to the development of a good person, or for this purpose, citizen. The moral character helps the student/citizen-in-training develop a universal distinction between right and wrong and the morally responsible way to achieve a result.

A common theme found throughout these three works is that the creation of good and competent students/citizens requires more than just knowledge based instruction. It also requires experiential learning. The trend of college graduate students voting in much higher percentages than high school students can help high schools develop citizens that are more responsible. Raymond Wolfinger (1980) creates a theoretical model that attempts to explain this development. In the model, he argues that college students develop an intimate understanding of self-governance and participatory government through fraternity governments, dorm floor management and large student government structures. In these structures, the student learns that their voice matters and that their participation and organizing of groups can institute fundamental change in the structure of how the government operates. From this experience, participants actively move the three types of good citizens into one model, which allows for transfer to the larger society after graduation. Unfortunately, most high schools never even come close to allowing this type of experience for their students.

While some examples, especially in the field of social education, of outstanding civic participation in high schools have been chronicled, unfortunately, these examples are rare. This is true despite the fact that almost every school has a form of student government, but that government actually governs little, if anything at all. A possible explanation of this development is the lack of teacher training for civic education. Many college social studies teacher education programs have very little emphasis on how to educate for citizenship, but a strong emphasis on the components of government and citizenship. The obvious result is that teachers enter the social studies profession with a strong knowledge of history, political theory and governmental structures, they have not

been exposed to methods as to how to develop “real-life” experiences in government, like those in college, which will compliment the knowledge of government and help create competent citizens. In addition, most school paid “professional development” activities that teachers currently attend deal with the requirements of No Child Left Behind, which stresses the development of math and language skills and making sure every student is proficient in these areas. The result is that most funds are not available to teachers interested in citizenship education and developing such citizens, which their teacher-training program in college did not address.

Before the future of citizenship education sound too bleak to continue, there is one thing that every school could implement. This is simply having a school government that actually governs the “real-life” issues at school. Whatever the structure, this would allow most students an active role in school governance. While the governance system could not be as complete as experienced by college students who actually discipline the rule breakers, it would begin to lay the groundwork for larger experiences. Voting in elections, campaigning for offices and developing ideas on issues that affect the school, students begin to learn the skills, traits and social awareness that moves them from being just good citizens, but to becoming a competent citizens in an advanced constitutional republic.

With this little change, schools can stop being the anti-democratic institutions they have always been, and become institutions that adequately reflect the society that they are supposed to be developing students to enter. The change does not have to stop there, and the areas for further improvement can become a partnership among the teachers and students, which can lead to even better ideas as to how to better develop

competent citizenship traits in students at the school. The connection between the participant and the government becomes less blurred for the student and the likelihood of transference of these skills into adult citizenship life increases.

To prepare their students for citizenship, schools must go beyond teaching literacy and numeracy, though both are of course prerequisites for deliberating about public problems. Schools should aim to develop their students' capacities to understand different perspectives, communicate their understandings to other people, and engage in the give and take of moral argument with a view of making mutually acceptable decisions. These goals, which entail cultivating moral character and intellectual skills at the same time, are likely to require some significant changes in traditional civics education, which has neglected teaching this kind of moral reasoning about politics.

- Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson

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