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CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: A UNITED STATES PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Citizenship education has long been a cornerstone of the United States (U.S.) education system. Since the Founding Fathers first organized the government there has been a general agreement that the basis of a democracy is a "good" citizen. This is a person who is informed about public policies and one who actively participated in the civic life of the community and state (Dagger, 1997). Moreover, today over 40 U.S. state constitutions declare the need for an informed electorate and 13 U.S. states explicitly state that the education system promotes "good citizenship, democracy, and free government" (Campbell, 2005, 63). Furthermore, national voluntary standards claim citizenship education as a central part of the mission of the social studies (Standards for Civics and Government, 1994; Expectations of excellence: Curriculum standards for social studies, 1994; National standards for history, 1996). Therefore, in the U.S. citizenship education is both a school mission and part of the formal curricular program. Thus said, what does this mean? How do educational systems in the U.S. fulfill this mission?
Almost 40 years ago Morgan (1968, 10) articulated in his classic publication *The American citizens handbook*, "Effective citizenship by individuals continues to require the same four essential elements: knowledge, thought, commitment, and action". In addition, two other dimensions exist in developing the "good" citizen: a) the social (i.e., interaction with each other), and b) the political (i.e., interaction with the state). More recently, research suggests five attributes critical to citizenship. They are: a) a sense of identity, b) an enjoyment of certain rights, c) certain obligations, d) an involvement in public affairs, and e) an acceptance of values (Cogan & Derricott, 1998, 2-3). Although most educators today would agree with these elements and dimensions, there is not a consensus on how to operationalize these elements, dimensions or attributes in the classroom nor is there agreement on how much emphasis should be placed on each. As articulated in the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. has a decentralized approach to public schooling. Thus, each state directs and controls its education system. No national mandated curriculum exists. Consequently, there exists little agreement across the U.S. on what citizenship education curriculum best fits the needs for one of the largest and most diverse nations in our world today.

U.S. educators face an enormous challenge when planning and implementing citizenship education programs. Historically, a prime goal has been to unite a diverse, multicultural population (Patrick & Hoge, 1991). This task is no less important today than it was over two centuries ago when the U.S. was conceived. However, the task is increasingly more complicated as the nation continues to be more diverse ethnically, racially, linguistically, and religiously. Moreover, members of these cultures no longer want to "melt" into the mainstream and adopt WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) characteristics. Many wish to become citizens of the U.S., adopt the democratic way of life, and reap the "blessings of liberty" without totally negating their cultural roots (Banks, 1997).

Today a plethora of citizenship education programs exist across the U.S. Generally these programs ascribe to three approaches. Often programs are rooted in one approach but they often blend elements from the other approaches to form programs that meet the needs of the student population they serve. This paper will: a) describe the three approaches to citizenship education most commonly practiced in the U.S., and b) illustrate how each approach might be operationalized U.S. schools.

**THREE APPROACHES TO CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

The first and most widely held approach to citizenship education in the U.S. is the traditionalist conception (Parker, 2003). This view holds that the primary mission of citizenship education is to teach civic knowledge (Rochester, 2005).
At the most advanced level it is highly academic and places the greatest focus on the "science" or the "pure discipline" of citizenship education. Facts, concepts, and theories are detailed and analyzed.

A typical model rooted in this conception is outlined by John Patrick (2005/2006). He identifies four components needed in all citizenship education curricula. First, and most important, is knowledge of democracy. A curriculum based on this conception stresses a lot of content knowledge. Students would be expected to understand the basic tenants of the U.S. Constitution. For example, concepts like popular sovereignty, rule of law, human rights and the rights of life, liberty, justice and the pursuit of happiness, and freedom of religion would be stressed. Most time and effort in the classroom would center on teaching the facts, concepts, and knowledge of the U.S. political system. The second component is gaining the intellectual skills of citizenship. Here, students would be asked to manipulate content knowledge to critically analyze, synthesis, and evaluate information. The third component is developing participatory skills. Under this component students would be required to take action or "do" democracy. Through their actions they would try to influence public policy. The last component is developing the dispositions of citizenship. This component would require students to accept and live the democratic values in everyday life. Through their actions they would demonstrate the civic virtues of self-restraint, civility, honesty, trust, courage, compassion, tolerance and respect. They would work to promote the common good. In other words, they would subordinate their personal interests for the good of the community. Although this model is not purely academic, it is important to note that Patrick (2005/2006) outlines that the most important component of the model is on ensuring content mastery. This is where most of the students' time and energy should be directed. He posits that by stressing the knowledge component students will develop the intellectual capital to assume active roles as citizens.

Although this approach is entrenched in the mainstream, this conception is criticized as being too narrow for the 21st century. First, it is too knowledge focused and neglects the social and cultural aspects of citizenship education adequately. Critics reflect that it focuses mainly on public policy while sidelining important social issues facing the increasingly diverse U.S. population. For example, issues like ethnicity, race, gender, and language are generally ignored. Second, it places most emphasis on knowledge concerning the U.S. political system at the expense of developing the skills needed become a global citizen. (Banks, 2001; Macedo, 2000; Parker, 2003).

The second approach is the progressive conception. Like the traditional approach this conception stresses civic knowledge but goes further and demands
that civic action accompanies academic knowledge. This approach stresses a curriculum centered on equipping students to: a) identify civic issues, b) suggest solutions, and c) take action that addresses these issues. The focus of this approach is to encourage students to become active participants in the society. It strives to push them beyond the political stage and move them into the social arena. Proponents of this approach view the academic component as a starting point and a "lens" through which students analyze current issues (Patrick & Hoge, 1991).

Schools embracing this approach place great emphasis on addressing current issues of student interest and encouraging student participation in civics at the local, state, and national levels. Teachers facilitate lively discussions and debates. School programs often provide ample opportunities for students to engage in community service projects. These opportunities may range from volunteering at a homeless shelter, tutoring young students, working on a "get out and vote" campaign, or picking up trash in the community. Many schools that ascribe to this approach require that students perform a minimum amount of community-service hours in order to graduate from high school.

This approach has long enjoyed a favor with countless social studies educators. Many see it as merging the intellectual elements of civics with a "hands on" practical approach that will prepare students well for their roles as future citizens. Traditionalists, however, criticize this approach as not being academic enough and too "values" laden. Some traditionalists claim many community service projects are rooted in a liberal political agenda (Rochester, 2005).

On the other hand, some liberal educators criticize this approach from a different perspective. These educators posit that, along with the traditionalist conception, this approach does not address the cultural diversity and inequities in the U.S. society. In other words, it is too assimilationist. They claim this approach strives to blend all citizens into one big "melting pot" which they contend no longer serves the needs of the diverse U.S. population (Macedo, 2000; Parker, 2003). Even though the progressive approach encourages student involvement in the community they contend that it does not focus enough on questioning the status quo nor does it stress inclusiveness; both approaches distance matters of race, gender, and ethnicity. Underlying both is a fear that acknowledgement of difference will hinder Americans from developing a unified national identity. James Banks (1997), a well-known U.S. social studies educator, reflects that these approaches to citizenship education have been:

constructed historically by powerful mainstream groups and [have] usually served their interests....[They have] fostered citizen passivity rather than action,
taught students large doses of historical myths in ...[the] attempt to develop patriotism...and reinforced the dominant social, racial, and class inequality in American society. (4)

Banks contends that citizenship education programs should expose students to the lofty ideals that laid the foundation of U.S. democracy and students should analyze the progress that has been made to achieve those ideals. However, students must go beyond this and evaluate the ways in which the U.S. has failed to live up to these ideals. Banks suggests that:

Students can become thoughtful, committed, and effective citizens only when they have internalized democratic ideals, are knowledgeable about the gap between the nation’s ideals and its realities, and have the commitment and skills to act to help close that gap. (9)

To address this issue some multicultural educators have reconceptualized citizenship education (Banks, 1997; Macedo, 2000; Parker, 2003). This approach recognizes the importance of teaching the civic knowledge as stressed by the traditional approach and values having students discuss issues and participate in civic activities as emphasized in the progressive approach. However, it extends these approaches by adding a third element. This element highlights the development of the appreciation of difference and multiple group identities. It strives to educate students “for political oneness and cultural diversity, with the understanding that these exist parallel to and in support of one another” (Parker, 2003, 30). It strives to include civic knowledge as stressed by the traditional approach and center learning in issues as ascribed by the progressive approach, however, it outlines this must be achieved through inclusion and deliberation.

How is this approach operationalized in the classroom? Parker (2003) encourages teachers to work toward “enlightened political engagement”. To accomplish this, teachers need to create learning experiences where students have numerous and varied meaningful contacts with people who are different from them. It is critical in these exchanges that teachers facilitate interactions so that deliberation may occur. Deliberation is unique and different from other common democratic activities like debate, negotiation, or voting. Deliberation occurs in a cooperative – verses a competitive – arena where individuals meet as equals in a discussion. The group members do not have to be friends or even like each other; however, respect and civility must be practiced. The purpose of deliberation is to have group members listen to each other and freely express their opinions. Then they are asked to analyze the options together and make decisions. Parker (2003) contends that deliberation, “creates an in-between space – potentially a solidarity across differences; a “we” – among people who are not
necessarily friends or relations but who need to accomplish a goal that requires a joining together.” (81)

Teachers who adhere to this approach might have students study and deliberate ethical issues facing the U.S. or the world today. Teacher could assign cooperative learning groups facilitate deliberation whereby each group member is responsible for researching a certain aspect of the issue and held responsible for their individual role in the group. With this approach the teacher is as concerned with the way the group interacts as with the content of the research collected and presented. Another example is where an elementary teacher conducts a class meeting where the students are asked to deliberate to form classroom rules. Here again, the focus is on the interaction amongst individuals with different status and opinions in the “public arena” of the classroom. The vital element of deliberation is the act of making the decision. Parker (2003) contends that developing deliberation skills where students with different social status meet and share diverse opinions will equip students with the skills needed to solve problems in a multicultural nation and world.

Critics of this approach claim this perspective is weak on content knowledge. They claim that students will spend so much time with the “social curriculum” that there little time will be left to adequately address the cognitive competencies. Critics posit that if students do not know key civic facts and understandings their discussion, or deliberation, will be of little value. They claim that the primary responsibility of school should be to provide students with solid academic instruction (Rochester, 2005).

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, most educators across the United States agree that one of the main goals of schooling in the nation should be to develop “good citizens”. It is not clear, however, how that task should be accomplished. I have summarized two of the most commonly ascribed approaches and outlined a relatively new approach that is currently being adopted by many teachers. As education programs are state mandated and locally controlled, teachers are often given latitude to interpret curriculum, and consequently a multitude of citizenship education programs exists across the U.S.

An analysis of these citizenship education programs probably show that most contain a blend of these three approaches, although most programs will probably give more emphasis to one approach than another. The curricula developed will often reflect and address issues deemed important by the citizens of the locale in which they reside. For instance, the needs of the children in a rural community
with a homogenous student population may differ from the needs of immigrant students living in a densely populated urban environment. Hence, the curricular program might be quite different in these two school districts. Another example might be if the school district or state has a high-stakes accountability system in place then the curriculum and teaching would probably reflect the traditional approach. High-stakes assessment usually reinforces knowledge of content over other goals. Therefore, often the traditional approach might best prepare the students to pass examinations that require them to know a lot of content knowledge. Finally, much of what occurs in a classroom is dependant upon the educational philosophy and individual talents and interests of the teacher. In the end, it is the teacher who models good citizenship, relates civic content knowledge to students, aids students in identifying and addressing public policy issues, and has the potential to facilitate deliberation within an inclusive environment amongst his or her students.

Thus, many factors influence citizenship education programs in the U.S. and until now there is little consensus concerning the most effective approach. However, it is evident that the student population of U.S. schools is diverse and, in the future, these children will increasingly work and interact with people that embrace different perspectives and beliefs than they hold. Therefore, in order to develop into caring, committed, and effective citizens of the U.S. and the world, thoughtful citizenship education programs need to be crafted.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


