

# WHAT KIND OF CITIZEN?

## THE POLITICS OF EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

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The notion of democracy occupies a privileged place in our society. Everyone believes democracy is desirable. Indeed, educators, policymakers, politicians, and community activists alike pursue dozens of agendas for change under the banner of furthering democracy. The nature of their underlying beliefs, however, differ. For some, a commitment to democracy is associated with liberal notions of freedom, while for others democracy is primarily about equality or equality of opportunity. For some, civil society is the key, while others place their hope for social change in healthy free markets. For some, good citizens in a democracy volunteer, while for others they take active parts in political processes by voting, forming committees, protesting, and working on campaigns. It is not surprising, then, that the growing number of educational programs that seek to further democracy by nurturing "good" citizens embody a similarly broad variety of goals and practices.

We titled this article "What Kind of Citizen?" to call attention to the spectrum of ideas about what good citizenship *is* and what good citizens *do* that are embodied by democratic education programs nationwide. We added the subtitle "The Politics of Education for Democracy" to underscore our belief that the narrow and often ideologically conservative conception of citizenship embedded in many current efforts at teaching for democracy reflects neither arbitrary choices nor pedagogical limitations but rather political choices with political consequences.

We spent two years studying ten programs that shared a basic set of priorities: they all hoped to teach good citizenship (through civics curriculum, service learning, and other means) by engaging students in analysis and action on community issues. But the different curricula we examined affected students in a variety of ways, not all of which were shared across programs. Moreover, the meanings leaders of these programs brought to notions of citizenship and to the term "democratic values" varied significantly. In our study, we were interested in these kinds of questions:

- What kind of citizen does each program aim to develop?
- How do students of these programs see themselves engaging in civic life?

In what follows, we detail three conceptions of citizenship that emerged from our analysis of both democratic theory and program goals and practices. We then describe two of the ten programs we studied and share data—both quantitative and qualitative—that illustrate the need for more discriminating analyses of programs that seek to nurture good citizens. We will be making the case that educators need to take into account the varied notions of citizenship reflected in different programs and that decisions we make in designing as well as researching these programs are, in fact, political.

## Three Kinds of Citizens

*What kind of citizen do we need to support an effective democratic society?* As part of a multi-year study of school-based programs that aim to teach democratic citizenship, we examined ten programs engaged in the Surdna Foundation's Democratic Values Initiative. From the study of both democratic theory and program goals and practices, a framework emerged that we used to order some of the diverse perspectives. We found that three visions of "citizenship" were particularly helpful: the *personally responsible citizen*; the *participatory citizen*; and the *justice oriented citizen* (see Table 1).

A caveat: although these three categories were chosen to highlight important differences in the ways educators conceive of democratic educational aims, we do not mean to imply that a given program might not simultaneously further more than one of these agendas. These categories were not designed to be mutually exclusive. At the same time, we believe that drawing attention to the distinctions between these visions of citizenship is important. It highlights the importance of examining the underlying goals and assumptions that drive different educational programs in design and practice.

### *The Personally Responsible Citizen*

The *personally responsible citizen* acts responsibly in his/her community by, for example, picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, volunteering, and staying out of debt. The personally responsible citizen works and pays taxes, obeys laws, and helps those in need during crises such as snowstorms or floods. 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. S/he might contribute time, money, or both to charitable causes.

Both those in the character education movement and many of those who advocate community service would emphasize this individualistic vision of good citizenship. 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). 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. They want students not to "threaten, hit, or hurt anyone [or use] bad language" (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](http://www.pointsoflight.org), 2003).

### *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*. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government and other institutions (eg. community based organizations, churches) 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. 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. 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*

A third image of a good citizen is, perhaps, the perspective that is least commonly pursued. We refer to this view as the justice oriented citizen, one that calls explicit attention to matters of injustice and to the importance of pursuing social justice goals. Justice oriented citizens critically assess social, political, and economic structures and consider collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address root causes of problems. 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. However, these programs emphasize preparing 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, Isaac, 1992; Bigelow and Diamond, 1988). 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. 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 or to critically analyze the social economic, and political structures that generate problems.

The strongest proponents of this perspective were likely the Social Reconstructionists who gained their greatest hearing between the two world wars. Educators like Harold Rugg (1921) argued that the teaching of history in particular and the school curriculum more generally should be developed in ways that connect with important and enduring social problems. Similarly, wanted educators to critically assess varied social and economic institutions while also "engag[ing] in the positive task of creating a new tradition in American life" (1932, 262). These educators emphasized that truly effective citizens needed opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social, economic, and political forces and to take part in projects through which they might develop skills and commitments for working collectively to improve society.

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**Table 1. Kinds of Citizens<sup>†</sup>**

	<b>Personally Responsible Citizen</b>	<b>Participatory Citizen</b>	<b>Justice Oriented Citizen</b>
<b>D E S C R I P T I O N</b>	<p>Acts responsibly in his/her community</p> <p>Works and pays taxes</p> <p>Obeys laws</p> <p>Recycles, gives blood</p> <p>Volunteers to lend a hand in times of crisis</p>	<p>Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts</p> <p>Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment</p> <p>Knows how government agencies work</p> <p>Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks</p>	<p>Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes</p> <p>Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice</p> <p>Knows about social movements and how to effect systemic change</p>
<b>S A M P L E</b>	<p>Contributes food to a food drive</p>	<p>Helps to organize a food drive</p>	<p>Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes</p>
<b>C O R E</b> <b>A S S U M P T I O N S</b>	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community</p>	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures</p>	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question and change established systems and structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time</p>

<sup>†</sup>For help in structuring this table, we are indebted to James Toole and a focus group of Minnesota teachers.

## Conflicting Priorities

It follows that if program goals and practices aim to develop different kinds of citizens and thereby advance different visions of democracy, then program developers, educational researchers, and funders should be cognizant of and address these differences in their work. Yet conceptions of democratic values and citizenship and the idea of what a good citizen does continue to be narrowly construed.

Most commonly, emphasis is placed on personal responsibility—especially by the character education and community service movements, both of which are well-funded efforts to bring about these particular kinds of reforms. We find this emphasis an inadequate response to the challenges of educating a democratic citizenry. The limits of character education and of volunteerism and the conservative political orientation reflected in many of these efforts have been addressed elsewhere in some detail: critics note that the emphasis placed on individual character and behavior obscures the need for collective and often public sector initiatives; that this emphasis distracts attention from analysis of the causes of social problems and from systemic solutions; that volunteerism and kindness are put forward as ways of avoiding politics and policy (Barber, 1992; Boyte, 1991; Westheimer and Kahne, 2000; Kahne and Westheimer, 1996).

As a way of illustrating what we see as the limitations of personally responsible citizenship, recall the central tenets of the Character Counts! Coalition. Certainly honesty, integrity, and responsibility for one's actions are valuable character traits for good neighbors and citizens. But, on their own, these traits are not inherently about democracy. To the extent that these traits detract from other important democratic priorities, they hinder rather than make possible democratic participation and change. For example, a focus on loyalty or obedience (common components of character education as well) work against the kind of critical reflection and action many assume are essential in a democratic society. Personal responsibility must be considered in a broader social context or it risks advancing mere civility or docility instead of democracy. Indeed, government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship: don't do drugs; show up to school; show up to work; give blood; help others during a flood; recycle; pick up litter; clean up a park; treat old people with respect. The leaders of Syria or China along with leaders of any democratic nation would argue that these are desirable traits for people living in a community. But they are not about democratic citizenship.

Reinforcing these criticisms of an exclusive focus on personally responsible citizenship, a study commissioned by the National Association of Secretaries of State (1999) found that less than 32 percent of eligible voters between the ages of 18 and 24 voted in the 1996 presidential election (in 1972, the comparable number was 50 percent), but that a whopping 94 percent of those aged 15-24 believed that "the most important thing I can do as a citizen is to help others" (also see Sax, et al., 1999). In a very real sense, youth seem to be "learning" that citizenship does not require government, politics, or even collective endeavors.

Research and evaluation of educational programs also reflect this conservative and individualistic conception of personally responsible citizenship. Studies commonly ask participants, for example, whether they feel it is their responsibility to take care of those in need and whether problems of pollution and toxic waste are "everyone's responsibility" or "not my responsibility." They rarely ask questions about corporate responsibility—in what ways industries should be regulated, for example—or about ways government policies can advance or hinder solutions to social problems. Survey questions typically emphasize individual and charitable acts. They ignore important influences like social movements and government policy on efforts to improve society. Educators who seek to teach personally responsible citizenship and researchers who study their programs focus on individual acts of compassion and kindness not on collective social action and the pursuit of social justice (Kahne, Westheimer, and Rogers, 2001).

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