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Navigating the Shoals of Civic Education

The Transformative Power of Civic Education

by
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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF CIVIC EDUCATION

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen G. Breyer often speaks about his concern over people's apathy and lack of knowledge about the government (Tulsa World, 1999). Teachers in the public schools often comment on how students are not aware of current events and view politics as something that doesn't affect their lives. University professors often complain about how little their students understand about the democratic process. While many seem to agree that this is an issue of concern, few have proposed any systematic action that will actually transform the situation.

Civic education would seem to be the natural place to start in addressing meaningful understanding and involvement in the democratic process. Unfortunately, civic education often takes three basic forms: 1) focusing on arbitrary surface activities such as a school word of the week to promote character, 2) teaching patriotism through modeling such routine activities as the pledge of allegiance or the national anthem, and 3) counting on the available knowledge that is transmitted to students from textbooks and lectures on how the government works. These practices do not seem to be changing the attitudes or actions of young people. A common, well accepted goal of civic education is for students to be actively engaged citizens in a democratic society. The problem is that we have not been successful in achieving that goal.

Coming from a background in Early Childhood Education that is rooted in the research of Jean Piaget and the theory of Constructivism, it makes sense to first look at how we learn. Whether we are four years old or fourteen years old, we all learn through active, meaningful, engagement. Learning is not something we do to students, rather it is

something we do with them (Kohn, 1996). Therefore, autonomy should be promoted and decision making opportunities on the part of the student should be plentiful. Just offering students choices is not enough though. It is the types of choices that students have, that make the difference, along with the guidance and facilitation provided by the educator. Real choices, important choices, meaningful choices are not always neatly defined. In life, there isn't always a clear right and wrong, that is part of what makes them a choice. For example, Kirschenbaum writes, "Caring and respectful persons are both pro-life and pro-choice. Caring and respectful persons refrain from and engage in premarital sex" (1992). In contrast, our students may engage in debates over such issues as whether pledging allegiance to the flag is patriotic or discriminatory.

Do these issues raise a red flag for you? Do you think adolescents aren't making these choices? All one has to do is read the newspapers or watch the news on television to be aware of the teen pregnancy, teen suicide, teen drug abuse, and children killing others in our schools (Kirschenbaum, 1992). By ignoring these issues or "telling" our students what to do, we are abandoning them. One can make good choices through autonomy which defined by Kamii is the ability to make knowledgeable decisions, based on the relevant facts, regardless of rewards or punishments (1985). How does an adolescent make a knowledgeable decision based on the relevant facts? One very powerful way is through Service-Learning. According to Kahne and Westheimer, Service-Learning embodies the belief that knowledge is not merely transmitted from teacher to learner, but rather is constructed by the learner through guided interaction with the environment. For example, when a group of students examine the issues of homelessness, make an action plan to be carried out, and reflect on their project, they are

not only learning academic skills but they are also learning that they can make a difference in the world in which they live (1996). Students could also examine the issues of teen pregnancies or teen drug abuse. Opponents of such endeavors have touted that it will only encourage promiscuous behavior. That makes about as much sense as saying that the students engaged in a Service-Learning project addressing the issues of homelessness will be more likely to become homeless. This relates to a key component that is a part of every good early childhood education program, which is experiential learning. Students gain logico-mathematical knowledge by making relationships in their mind. True understanding is attained through experiences that involve inquiry, investigation, and experimentation. As students develop, they are more capable of understanding abstract ideas, although experience is still vital to the learning process. For example, if students are to fully understand democracy, they must experience it. Authentic Service-Learning projects can serve as a meaningful springboard for students to exercise their understanding of the world in which they live. Through transformative Service-Learning endeavors, students will not only read about issues and practices of democracy but actually experience the inner workings of society.

Does this sound like another liberal, ivory tower viewpoint that is not based in the reality of today's society? Is it not a practical idea for students to actually experience democracy in schools if we want them to be active, caring citizens? Apathy has been referred to as sense of unfeelingness or a mind paralysis (Tulsa World, 1999). Nel Noddings addresses this by stating, "All children must learn to care for other human beings, and all must find an ultimate concern in some center of care" (p. 366, 1995). Students need to experience giving and the associated intrinsic rewards. They need

validation on what they have to offer society and a chance to be a contributing member. They need guidance in knowing how and where to affect change (Clark, 1990). Through meaningful, authentic Service-Learning experiences, students can find their voice. Once someone finds their voice, they are less likely to be silent. Finding your voice is in a way finding your passion and that increases the chances for sustainability.

As teacher educators, it is important for us to find our own voice and encourage our students to do the same. How is it possible to be passionate about teaching and not address political or value-laden issues? Bruner stated, "education is already politicized and that its political side needs finally to be taken into account more explicitly, not simply as though it were 'public protest'" (p. 29, 1996). This point was made explicit for me as I was sitting in on a discussion about Service-Learning grant ideas. The ideas being suggested for implementation with youth were of the carrot and stick nature. If you do this, you get that. When it was suggested that students have more voice and address issues of concern and interest to them, the reaction was "We don't want to end up in the newspapers." Why are we so fearful of the voices of youth. Why do we feel such an overpowering need to control and manipulate youth into doing what we think they should do? One of the main reasons adolescents give for not being more active in their community is that they feel powerless to effect change. This makes sense when you look at the rules and procedures in schools. It is ironic that early childhood and elementary students are often given more decision making opportunities and responsibility than students in middle school. For example, young children often help devise the classroom rules, work in cooperative learning groups, regulate their own use of the restroom, decide the topic of study, and plan projects, while middle school students have to have

homework signed by their parents, have to ask permission to go to the restroom, have assigned seating, and one right way of doing things according to the teacher. Shouldn't the autonomy increase as students get older? We seem to have a fear of allowing youth to think for themselves. It is important to remember that the more we insist on conformity with adolescents, the more likely they are to calculate the risks or rebel. If we want youth to respect adults and authority figures, then we must respect them and their ideas. This respect must be made evident through our actions. By honoring youth voice and providing opportunities for students to plan Service-Learning projects with adult assistance, we are taking a positive step toward transformative civic education.

As Terry Pickeral has often commented, that while Make a Difference Day is great, we need to make a difference that makes a difference. The same is true for us as educators. Reform cannot just be about doing something different, rather it must be about making a difference. As one academic put it, "There is only one argument for doing something; the rest are arguments for doing nothing. The argument for doing something is that it is the right thing to do" (Cornford, p. 10, 1999).

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