

What Kind of Citizen?

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Let no one attempt with small gifts of charity to exempt themselves from the great duties imposed by justice.

—Pope Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*



Ask people of any nation if they think children should learn how to be good citizens and most will say, “Of course!” Ask them if teaching children to get involved in their community is a good idea, and, again, most will assure you that it is. But when the questions go deeper, the easy consensus starts to fray. Beyond the clichés, when educators wrestle with the details of what will actually be taught about civic values, civic participation, peace and war, nationhood and citizenship, global communities and global economies, polite conversation gives way to heated exchanges.

Teachers, administrators, parents, and policymakers hold an assortment of different and sometimes contradictory beliefs. It should not be surprising, then, that school programs that seek to teach good citizenship represent a similarly broad variety of goals and practices. Some programs are based on the belief that good citizens show up to work on time, follow the rules, and pay taxes. Others hope to teach students to be nice to their neighbors and to act decently to the people around you. A few programs seek to teach students to help shape social policy on behalf of those in need. When educators, policymakers, politicians, and community members pursue democratic citizenship, they do so in many different ways and toward many different ends.

My colleague Joseph Kahne and I spent the better part of a decade studying programs that aimed to develop good citizenship skills among youth and young adults. In study after study, we come to similar conclusions: the kinds of goals and practices commonly represented in curricular frameworks and school-based activities that hope to foster democratic citizenship usually have more to do with voluntarism, charity, and obedience than with democracy. In other words, “good citizenship” to many educators means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen – not grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions that every citizen in a democratic society needs to learn how to do.

From our studies and with the help of teachers and program leaders, we identified three visions of “good” citizens that help capture the lay of the land when it comes to citizenship education in the United States and Canada: the *Personally Responsible Citizen*; the

Participatory Citizen; and the *Social Justice Oriented Citizen*. This summary might help you situate your own programs among these kinds of goals. They can serve as a helpful guide to uncovering the variety of assumptions that fall under the idea of citizenship education (see the table, below).

Personally Responsible Citizens contribute to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteer to help those less fortunate whether in a soup kitchen or a senior center. They might contribute time, money, or both to charitable causes. Both those in the character education movement and those who advocate community service would emphasize this vision of good citizenship. They seek to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work. Or they nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer community service.

Participatory Citizens actively participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state/provincial, and national levels. 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.

Social Justice-Oriented Citizens know how to critically assess multiple perspectives. They are able to examine social, political, and economic structures and explore strategies for change that address root causes of problems – these are the critical thinkers. We called this kind of citizen the *Social-Justice Oriented Citizen* because these programs emphasize the need for citizens to be able to think about issues of fairness, equality of opportunity, and democratic engagement. They share with the vision of the *Participatory Citizen* an emphasis on collective work related to the life and issues of the community. But the nature of these programs give priority to students thinking independently, looking for ways to improve society, and being thoughtfully informed about a variety of complex social issues. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about ways to effect systemic change.

If *Participatory Citizens* are organizing the food drive and *Personally Responsible Citizens* are donating food, the *Social Justice Oriented Citizens* are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.

Questions

- If you work in a service-learning program or a character-education program, teach a civics class, or facilitate community-service activities, try discussing the kinds of goals represented by the three visions of the “good” citizen” with your colleagues. Do you or your colleagues emphasize one or more of these kinds of goals?

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- If you are a school administrator or a policymaker, think about whether school or districtwide policies enable or constrain particular visions of citizenship or favor some goals over others.
- If you are a prospective teacher or a student, reflect on some of your own educational experiences. Were you or are you being taught to be the kind of citizen that is personally responsible, participates, and/or thinks critically about root causes of problems and their solutions?
- If you are a parent or an interested community member and you imagine your ideal society, what kinds of citizens would populate its towns and cities?

Kinds of Citizens			
	Personally Responsible	Participatory	Social-Justice Oriented
DESCRIPTION	<p>Acts responsibly in their community</p> <p>Works and pays taxes</p> <p>Picks up litter, recycles, and gives blood</p> <p>Helps those in need, lends a hand during times of crisis</p> <p>Obeys laws</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</p> <p>Explores strategies for change that address root causes of problems</p> <p>Knows about social movements and how to effect systemic change</p> <p>Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice</p>
SAMPLE ACTION	<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>
CORE ASSUMPTIONS	<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>

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