Justice-Oriented Citizens

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) state that although their study about three kinds of citizens, the personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented, takes place in two school programs in a suburban/rural East coast community, it is not so much about strategies educators can use to reach a particular destination as it is about the destination itself (p. 3). For the authors, the destination is “important democratic participation and change” (p. 6). Traits of personally responsibility hinder democratic citizenship because they do not make change possible and only require the citizen to do what they should do, such as recycle or volunteer at a soup kitchen. Through surveys, observation, and semi-structured interviews, with two grade-12 programs, Westheimer and Kahne investigated if participatory citizenship – those who actively participate in civic affairs, promotes students’ capacity for critical analysis and social change, and also if the focus on social justices creates civic actors, not just individuals talking about action (p. 7).

Following data analysis, results showed that participatory and justice-oriented programs did not necessarily create skills in students to critically analyze root causes of social problems and reach other desired goals. Explicit attention to both participatory and justice-oriented program goals is required to have an impact. It also became apparent that personal responsibility appeared to have furthered the conservative vision of government and undermined any effort to prepare participatory and justice-oriented citizens (p. 21).

Of particular importance for me as an educator who is passionately interested in finding ways to empower learners to take control of their learning through meaningful and engaging content and activities, is the notion of “realness” that the justice-oriented programs created for learners. One participant of the Bayside Students for Justice program, for instance, stated that she generally did not like to learn by reading as it went in one ear and out the other. About this justice-oriented program, she said it was “more exciting because it was more real…we were out there instead of just with our heads in the books…now I finally see (that) you can use your knowledge of history to make a better world” (p.15). Although this is only one learner’s point of view, and most teachers do not have the ability to physically take their students out to get hands on, real-life, justice-oriented experience, there are ways for students to make a significant impact in the real world through technology, presentations, workshops, etc.

As ideal as this teaching situation sounds, however, it may currently be an over-ambitious endeavour based on the lack of resources for new teaching techniques and strategies, and because of the overall political environment of the school. For instance, Hargreaves and Jacka’s (2010) case study of a new teacher who was not properly prepared for adjusting to the “unchanged realities” of schools, or for the ability to critique and challenge the realities demonstrates how even though a teaching method or philosophy may sound right, it may not always work (p. 58) The authors define her training as “soft seduction” as she was led to beliefs and practices that were not conducive to her teaching context, labelling these types of training programs as “Disneyworlds of professional development” (p. 60). They argue that new teachers should be prepared to transform the conditions and cultures of schooling. But I would like to learn how it is possible to go about doing that? Possibly “sneaking in through the back-door”, just getting into a school that has somewhat of a vision for progress and change, adapt to the teaching conditions of that particular context, and slowly attempt to invoke change through evidence and celebration of success? What other ways could new teachers transform their conditions?