



Citizenship Education: Are Schools Up to It?

A REVIEW OF **FROM STUDENT TO CITIZEN: A COMMUNITY-BASED VISION FOR DEMOCRACY**

BY PETER H. HENNESSY, WHITE KNIGHT BOOKS, 2006: ISBN 0-9736705-6-8

In this book Peter Hennessy, drawing on his experience as history teacher, high school principal, professor of education, and observer of the educational scene, makes three claims. First, all education policy must be “keyed to the idea of good citizenship as the test of effective schooling” (p.198). Second, existing schools cannot educate for truly democratic citizenship, partly because of their inevitably authoritarian structure but also because of the many competing demands on their resources. Third, education for citizenship requires a radical rethinking of schooling by greatly increasing the range of student choice and by moving education out of the school and into the community.

The first claim seems to me incontestable. The second and third contain some truth but are, I think, overstated; to the extent that Canada is a functioning democracy, its schools can legitimately take some credit. In the case of all three claims, I would have liked to see Hennessy push his arguments further than he does. Even so, he provokes the reader to think seriously about what is involved in educating citizens.

Though he speaks well of the de-schoolers of the 1960s and 1970s, Hennessy wants not so much to de-school society as to de-institutionalize schooling by erasing the boundary between school (especially curriculum) and the wider community. For Hennessy, citizenship education is not a matter of more civics courses but of embedding appropriate subject matter in a context of community-based learning to provide students with the experience of participant citizenship.

He describes citizenship as a composite of three elements: personal autonomy, personal security, and community engagement (I would add democratic values and political efficacy) and defines autonomy as the ability to make “real and substantial choices that respect the rights and choices of others” (p.186). However, he says nothing about what to do when our personal choices conflict with those of others or make greater demands than can be met

from available resources. These questions, crucial elements of democratic citizenship, are left unexplored.

Hennessy argues that the most beneficial learning is that which helps students understand themselves and that the purpose of schooling is preparing young people “to face the complexities of independent living and the responsibilities of a democracy” (p.126). This, I would argue, is precisely what makes a challenging liberal education for all students so important a vehicle for citizenship education. How best to organize and teach it remains the great unsolved pedagogical question. I would have liked to see more exploration of both curriculum and citizenship; I am not sure whether Hennessy sees community-based education as a vehicle of liberal education for all – and if so what that liberal education might consist of – or as an alternative to it.

Citizenship is inevitably a national construct. Even the most ardent exponents of global citizenship carry national passports, and communities exist in a national context. Even if we want schools to teach “a community-based vision of democracy” we cannot avoid the question of what we want students to know about Canada and the rest of the world. Nor should we ignore Richard Rorty’s argument that our loyalty should be to the country as we wish it to be, not simply as it is. In Rorty’s words, “You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one in which you wake up every morning” (*Achieving Our Country*, p.101). I would say “as well as” not “rather than,” but in either case we need what only a truly liberal education can provide.

It is not enough to speak of “personal autonomy gestating securely in a womb of community solidarity” (p.197). Communal solidarity can be more of a cage than a womb. There are lots of communitarians that would be only too happy to impose their communal values on the rest of us and who define autonomy as the acceptance of community values. Like Socrates,

good citizens have to be ready to defy community solidarity when necessary.

There is an underlying consensualism in Hennessy’s vision of citizenship that underestimates the unavoidable divisiveness of democracy. For myself, I have learned to distrust the wishes of the majority on occasion. I have also learned that many political problems are not so easily solved; that is why they became political, rather than managerial or administrative, problems in the first place. Learning to live with their ambiguities and contradictions, and accepting that other people see them differently, is an important part of citizenship education.

Nonetheless, this book provokes questions and, as such, makes a useful contribution to the ongoing debate about how best to educate for citizenship. |

KEN OSBORNE IS AN EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA. HE TAUGHT HISTORY IN WINNIPEG HIGH SCHOOLS FROM 1961 INTO THE 1970S WHEN HE JOINED THE STAFF OF THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA. HE HAS WRITTEN EXTENSIVELY ON THE TEACHING OF HISTORY AND ON CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION.

