

A Theoretical Model of Four Conceptions of Civic Education

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Abstract

The field of civic education is one that encompasses an abundance of topics and issues. In an attempt to bring some much needed clarity to this field, this conceptual study will question the way different epistemological conceptions of citizenship and education influence the characteristics of civic education. Offering a new conceptual framework that concentrates on the different undercurrent conceptions that lay at the base of the civic education process, a new typology of the term civic education will be presented. With the use of the methods of ideal types, four conceptions of civic education will be brought forth: *Liberal Civic Education*; *Diversity Civic Education*; *Critical Civic Education* and *Republican Civic Education*. After describing these conceptions and the theoretical field on which they are based, the potential applications of these conceptions in the classrooms and in research will be presented.

Introduction

The last decade of the 20th century and the beginning years of the third millennium have shown a rise of the ongoing discourse regarding the meaning of the term 'citizenship'. The challenge of the fundamental position of the nation-state has turned this debate to a vital one. The collapse of the former USSR, the further establishment of the European Union, and the declaration of war on terror organizations, as opposed to sovereign states have all contributed to this ongoing debate. In respect to this reality, the question of how to educate the young citizens of the state emerges (Heater, 2004b). Although the question of what kind of citizen is promoted in this educational process is as old as the term citizen itself (Heater, 2004a), it is still cardinal specifically in the context of education for citizenship in a democratic state.

When engaging in the field of civic education one may be overwhelmed by the abundance of topics and issues that this field encompasses (Levstik & Tyson, 2008). Numerous studies have attempted to bring some clarity to this convoluted field, based both on its theoretical aspects (Parker, 2008) and on the evaluation of empirical case studies (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The purpose of this study is to advance the discourse even further, by offering a new conceptual framework that concentrates on the different underlying conceptions influencing the ways we think and enact civic education process. Therefore, the main research question may be framed as what different conceptions of citizenship and civic education influence the contemporary discourse of this field? This question will be answered with the use of the methodology of ideal types. A new typology of the term civic education will be presented encompassing four conceptions of civic education: *Liberal Civic Education*; *Diversity Civic Education*; *Critical Civic Education* and *Republican Civic Education*. After describing these conceptions and the theoretical field on which they are based, the potential applications of these conceptions in the classrooms and in research will be presented.

In general, the common denominator across studies dealing with the field of civic education is the interest in examining what types of citizens the state wants to cultivate, and how to implement that concept within an educational framework (Parker, 2008). National and cross-national studies have concentrated mainly on the tasks of stimulating civic engagement amongst the youth by the means of instilling democratic knowledge, values and beliefs (Hahn & Alviar-Martin, 2008). Nevertheless, although all agree about the importance of this topic, in fact this field encompasses various ideological conceptions regarding citizenship in the democratic state, conceptions that produce significantly differing educational plans.

This state of affairs may be seen as what Dewey (1927, as cited by Parker 2008) described as “the great bad,” referring to “the mixing of things which need to be kept distinct” (p. 83). In the contemporary discourse regarding civic education this “great bad” occurs when different fundamental conceptions of citizenship are translated into educational practices that are incompatible with one another at best and contradictory at worst. Based on the notion of instructional program coherence (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001), which stresses the importance of holding a solid and coherent educational plan, not holding a coherent conception of citizenship while engaging in the civic education process may be counterproductive. Although one may claim that this abundance of topics may be seen in a positive light, this reality may lead to a situation in which different components of several conceptions of citizenship exist parallel to one another producing unhelpful contradictions. In addition, as noted by the Hebrew Talmudic proverb “if you have seized a lot, you have not seized”, in this situation the teachers and students may be supplied with more than they can actually grasp, which may potentially lead them to abandon any civic aspect what-so-ever.

The Methodology of Ideal Types

The term ideal type has been brought forth by the founder of the field of Euro-American social sciences, the German sociologist Max Weber (1949). He explains that these types may be seen as an attempt to create “a mental construct for the scrutiny and systematic characterization of individual concrete patterns which are significant in their uniqueness” (p. 100). It is important to point out that the use of ideal types should not be seen as a method of describing reality, but rather as an intellectual tool manifesting the portrayal of a phenomenon.

Ideal types have been used before as a research method in the general field of educational research (Banks, 1998) and specifically in the field of civic education (Sears & Hughes, 1996; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Sears and Hughes (1996) researched the existing conceptions of civic education in the Canadian curriculum. In the same manner, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) surveyed the different undercurrent beliefs of good citizenship in educational programs aimed at promoting democracy in the USA. In these two cases the researchers implemented the idea of composing ideal types based on specific points of view, while questioning the different educational aspects of each type. Nevertheless, the main flaw of these two studies is the lack of a strong theoretical ground on which the ideal types presented are based. The choice of Sears and Hughes and of Westheimer and Kahne to base their ideal types on the inductive methodology resulted in a creation of types that were created based on a reality at a given place and time. In

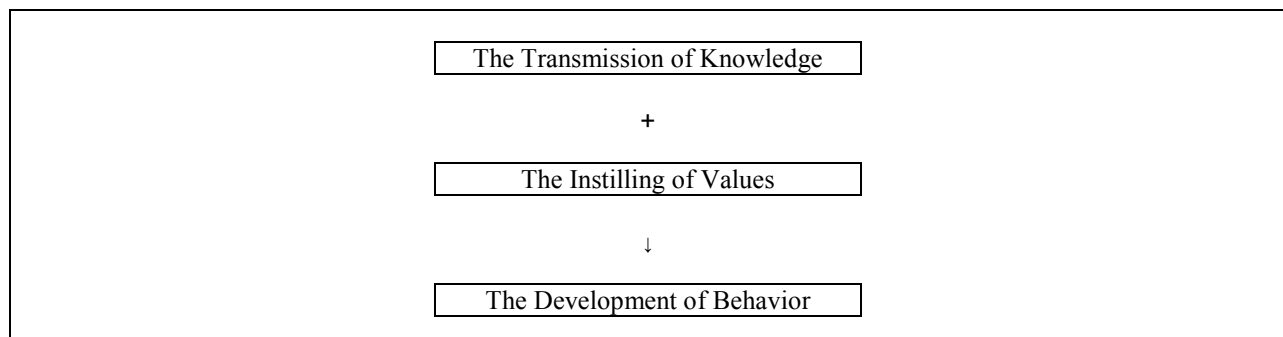
other words, these ideal types represent the specific reality of the cases studied by the researcher, be it the curriculum in Canada or the educational programs in the USA.

The ideal types to be presented herein are different in the sense that they are based on a theoretical-philosophical debate rather than on a specific empirical case study. This deductive research method was chosen in order to insure that the ideal types will not represent a particular reality at a given place and time, but rather bring forth the contemporary anthological and epistemological debate in a pristine manner. It is important to point out though that the types produced through a deductive approach may be difficult to implement in research or in a lesson due to their strong theoretical basis. Nevertheless, this approach has merit in understanding the deeper theoretical undercurrents at play in any civic education process.

The Theoretical Field

The four offered conceptions of civic education are rooted in the notion that education may be seen as an aspiration to influence the ways in which the individual behaves in society (Dewey, 1906 / 1990). In addition, these conceptions are based on the widespread agreement (CIRCLE, 2003; Parker, 2002) that the civic educational process may be seen as standing on three main pillars: (1) knowledge (2) values and (3) behavior (see figure 1).

Figure 1 – The Educational Process



The focus on civic education reveals the normative expected behavior of the citizen in the state. It is assumed that this behavior is an outcome of both the knowledge that has been passed on and the values that have been instilled. These three components of the educational process – political knowledge, normative values and expected behaviors – will stand at the base of the following theoretical matrix from which the four conceptions of civic education will be drawn.

The four suggested conceptions or ideal types of civic education may be set on a theoretical field between the interactions of two axes: political knowledge and normative values. As stated, this is based on the assumption that the civic educational process is mainly composed of the passing on of knowledge and the instilling of values that together promote an expected civic behavior. It is important to acknowledge that additional factors, such as psychoanalytical

aspects, also have influence on this civic behavior. Nevertheless, it is the purpose of this study to illuminate the social arena in which these additional factors exist.

The vertical axis (y) of political knowledge relates to what has been phrased as “civic literacy” (Milner, 2002) meaning the process in which specific knowledge is passed on to the student. Political knowledge may be comprised of facts about the state’s citizens and its political institutions. The main purpose of this concept is to create a common base of knowledge to be shared by members of society. This knowledge is seen as essential in order to take part in the social sphere and participate in a state’s formal political processes (Lam, 2000). It is important to point out that whereas this concept may be interpreted as indoctrination, the main concern is with passing on information regarding everyday life in society rather than a grand ideology. As Milner (2002) explains, this concept of civic education emphasizes "...the knowledge and ability of citizens to make sense of their political world" (p. 1).

A good example of this concept is the demand that students know meanings of several terms which are seen as cardinal to the social sphere. Crick (2000) offers a list of terms seen by him as the keystones of life in the British public sphere, including the terms: “Power, Force, Authority, Order, Law, Justice, Representation, Pressure, Natural Rights, Individuality, Freedom and Welfare” (p. 95). It is interesting to point out that those who advocate for a basic civic literacy most often position their work as enabling students to develop their own decisions rather than any value system clarification (Milner, 2002).¹ In this manner, Crick does not reference the ongoing debate regarding the term “welfare” but rather sees it as a fragment of knowledge that should be taught rather than a term that is connected to specific values.

The continuum of this vertical axis is based on the dichotomy between two types of knowledge regarding life in society – procedural knowledge and substantive knowledge (Bell & Staeheli, 2001; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). The procedural far end represents knowledge regarding the institutions, rules, and practices of governance, such as the understanding of the voting system or the methods with which minority voices are represented in government (Dahl, 1998; Schumpeter, 1947). The other end represents knowledge regarding what is seen as the substantive fundamental principles on which the state exists, such as the social-economic structure of society or information regarding the cultural foundations of the state (Marshall, 1950; Tamir, 1993).

The horizontal axis (x) of normative values is based on the assumption that for the sake of the existence of society citizens must possess certain values, aptitudes and dispositions. For example, White (1996) explains that in order for a democratic society to exist, its members must hold a democratic nature. She stresses, therefore, the need for instilling the basic universal values that are perceived as essential to the existence of this democratic society. In the same manner, Avnon (2005) argues that the values that should stand at the center of this educational process are those values that express the complexity of the encounters between the different individuals in the social framework such as equality, freedom and justice. Bottery (2000) explains that such

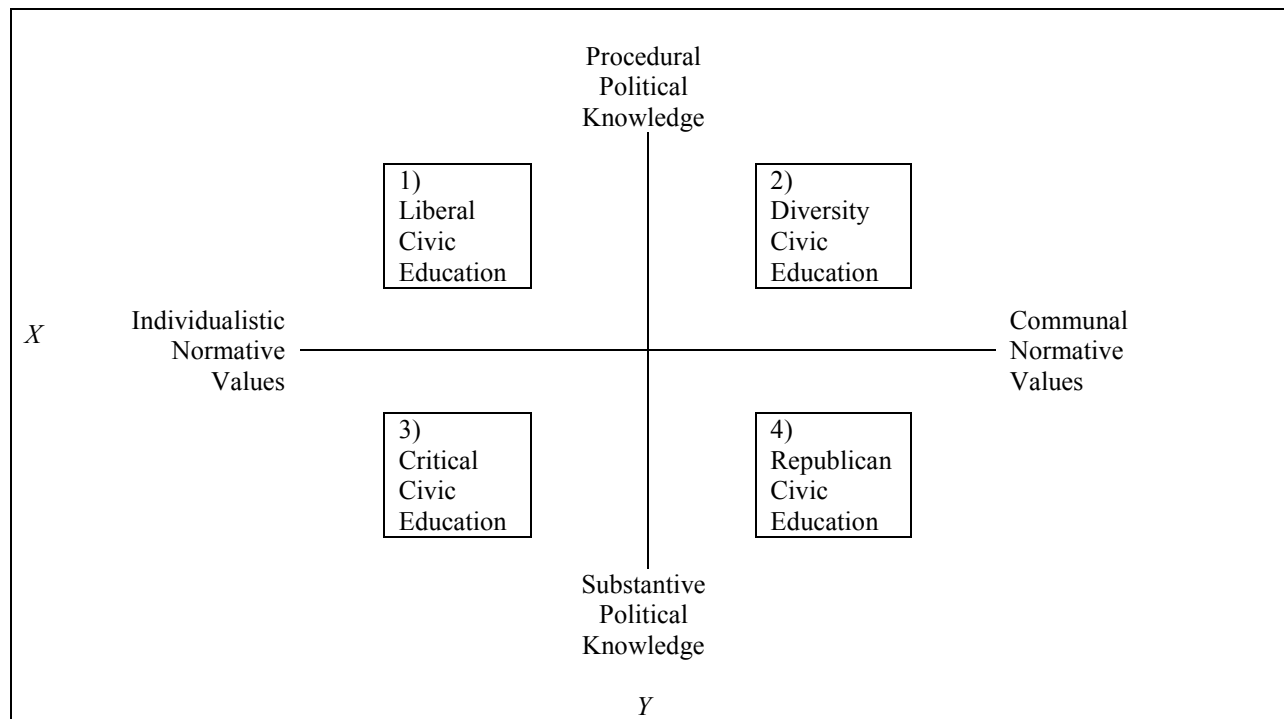
¹ Of course this statement itself may be seen as based on a specific value setting. It is important to remember that this description is part of the larger theoretical model.

values are present at several different contexts that should be considered, such as the dominant values of society, the values that guide the school system and the values that are present in the curriculum and the lessons.

The continuum of this horizontal axis is based on the dichotomy between two valued based perceptions of society – an individualistic perception and a communal one (Habermas, 1994). On the individualistic side of this debate one may find the liberal point of view that emphasizes the place of the individual in the social setting (Rawls, 1971), and promotes values such as productiveness or critical thinking. The communal end represents the republican point of view which stresses the communal meanings of citizenship in society and the affiliation of the individual to a larger social group such as a community or the state (Sandel, 1984). Thus, values such as national solidarity will be endorsed.

The interaction between these two axes creates the theoretical plane on which the four conceptions of civic education emerge. It is suggested that these conceptions are determined by the combination of what type of knowledge and which perception of values are emphasized in the educational process, influencing the civic behavioral outcome (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Four Conceptions of Civic Education on Two Axes



The choice of knowledge and values place the expected civic behavior at a point on the theoretical matrix. For example, if the desired civic behavior is of a liberal character the knowledge that will be passed on will include the procedural ways in which the individual can

act in the social sphere and in the same manner, the values to be instilled will stress the importance of the acts of the individual. On the other hand, if the desired outcome is of a republican nature, the knowledge to be passed on will reference content regarding the philosophical foundations of the larger national entity and communal values such as solidarity will be stressed.

Four Conceptions of Civic Education

The four conceptions of civic education that emerge from this theoretical field may be seen as ideal types due to the fact that *de facto* not one of them exists in its full form in reality. This model, therefore, may be seen as an analytical heuristic device in order to assist teachers, practitioners, scholars and researchers in understanding the complex process of civic education. To follow is a detailed illustration of each one of these conceptions based on significant sources that best exemplify the particular conception and the main arguments that it brings forth. First a description of each conception's main educational goal will be stated.

1. Liberal Civic Education – the student will develop the individualistic skills needed in order to take part in the political process
2. Diversity Civic Education – the student will understand the ways in which the different social groups that compose society may receive recognition and take part in the national field
3. Critical Civic Education – the student will develop individual analytical skills needed in order to better understand the unjust reality of society
4. Republican Civic Education – the student will possess a feeling of belonging and solidarity to the national entity

1. Liberal Civic Education - The assumption of this conception of civic education is that society is composed of individuals, and thus civic education should cultivate the role that the individual takes in the public sphere (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996). In order to develop this role, supporters of this concept ask two main questions: (1) does the individual hold the required knowledge regarding her/his function in society and (2) is the individual competent to act in this public sphere. It is important to point out that based on this concept's assumption the individual is seen as an autonomous being, aimed at achieving her/his own personal goals. Therefore, the ability of the individual to be active in the public sphere is seen as essential in order to reach these personal goals.

In this sense, this conception of civic education emphasizes the required intellectual and practical tools necessary for life in a democratic state (Lawry, Laurison, & VanAntwerpen, 2006). Thus, emphasis is placed on procedural knowledge and individualistic values such as personal behavior, independence and responsibility. Such behaviors may include acquaintance with the different opportunities for political involvement such as voting, connecting to representatives and understanding the main issues being debated. As stated, all these factors are

aimed at enhancing the individual's personal situation within a pre-given social, political, and economic situation.

2. Diversity Civic Education - The main assumption that stands at the base of this conception of civic education is the salience of the social constructs on the citizen's life. Therefore, the main goal may be seen as the need to raise awareness regarding the social reality and in particular to the oppression of different social groups by the stronger forces of society (Adams, Bell & Griffin 2007; Banks, 2004).

This conception of civic education will concentrate on the ability of the individual to evaluate the social framework in which the individual exists. In this manner this conception is different than *Liberal Civic Education* due to the shift of emphasis from the factor of individual actualization to the scrutiny of the social surroundings. The purpose of this shift is to reevaluate the ability of different social groups to overcome different circumstances, and to supply a greater understanding of the social forces that are put to work in order to maintain the given reality. Thus, the emphasis in the classroom is on the development of a thoughtful, active, and effective citizenry that relates to this social reality (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Marri, 2005), which therefore too may be seen mainly as procedural knowledge as well.

3. Critical Civic Education - This conception of civic education is rooted in the assumption that the world may be portrayed as a battle ground between social forces, where the dominant hegemonic powers work in both exposed and hidden ways in order to oppress the weaker players. Thus, the supporters of this point of view critique the idea of generalization and objective knowledge, and call to emphasize the historical and social context of knowledge and of social issues (Kincheloe, 2007), which thus may be seen as substantive knowledge.

The role of education is seen as a means of promoting social justice and democracy by empowering the students and cultivating their intellect. For example, based on this conception the standard curriculum is seen as a part of the power structure, and thus must be constantly scrutinized. Whereas the conception of *Diversity Civic Education* emphasized the awareness to the communal forces that compose society, this approach stresses the importance of developing personal individualistic skills, such as critical thinking, in order to better understand and react to the unjust reality of society (Apple, 1993).

4. Republican Civic Education - At the basis of this conception of civic education stands the fundamental question that asks why are individuals willing to give up some elements of their personal freedom as part of their life in a larger community? An answer to this question is presented by Taylor (1996) who explains that the feeling of belonging to a larger social entity is a natural human will. Rousseau's (1762 / 1947) suggested term "the general will," also relates to this question, explaining the natural perception of goods shared by all human beings who live in a society. Thus, through the general will, it is possible to create a feeling of genuine belonging and unconditional devotion of the individual to the larger social entity.

This conception of civic education will emphasize the ways in which to arouse feelings of membership and affiliation to the larger community, thus relating to the substantive elements of

society (Ravitch, 1988). In addition, this conception will stress the commitment of each individual to societies shared goals (Ben Porath, 2007).

We can further understand these four conceptions of civic education by comparing each conception's undercurrent assumptions (see table 1). For instance, for both *Liberal Civic Education* and *Diversity Civic Education* political knowledge is the understanding of the procedural means in which to take part in the public sphere. On the other hand, *Critical Civic Education* and *Republican Civic Education* define political knowledge as the understanding of the deeper principles that are set at the base of society and of the state. Regarding the social values being instilled, both *Liberal Civic Education* and *Critical Civic Education* see society as a mere gathering of individuals. On the other hand, *Diversity Civic Education* and *Republican Civic Education* see man as a social creature that can fulfill her/himself only when taking part of a larger social entity, and thus, society is defined based on the a priori connections between the individuals that compose it, either at the community or the state levels.

The role of education and the specific goals of civic education are seen by the different conceptions in a diverse manner as well. *Liberal Civic Education* and *Diversity Civic Education* put emphasis on the process of the **transmission** of knowledge as opposed to *Critical Civic Education* and *Republican Civic Education* that emphasize the **instilling** of values and principles. Whereas it is enough in the framework of *Liberal Civic Education* and *Critical Civic Education* to **develop** individual skills, *Diversity Civic Education* and *Republican Civic Education* strive to **promote** a feeling of possession. The distinct differences between the verbs "pass on," "instill," "develop," and "promote" contributes to our understanding of the complexity of this topic.

Table 1: Conceptions of Civic Education – A Comparison

| | Liberal Civic Education | Diversity Civic Education | Critical Civic Education | Republican Civic Education |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| Nature of Man | Individual | Affiliated to a social group | Individual that is juxtaposed to other individuals and groups | Affiliated to the nation/state |
| Nature of Society | A gathering of individuals | A gathering of social groups | A reality in which power structures maintain oppression | The nation as a whole that is worth more than the sum of its parts |
| Perception of Knowledge | Emphasizes knowledge that is aimed at helping the individual act in the public sphere | Emphasizes knowledge that is aimed at helping the social groups act in the public sphere | A tool in the hands of the oppressors that can be utilized in order to question reality | Emphasizes knowledge regarding the larger social entity |
| Perception of Attitudes | Emphasizes the individualistic values | Emphasizes values which connect the individual to the social group | Can be manipulated in order to maintain social reality | Emphasizes values which connect the individual to the larger social entity |
| Role of Education | Develop individual skills | Develop skills in order to enhance the reality of the social group and its place in society | Develop critical abilities | Promote a feeling of belonging to the larger social entity |
| Normative Goals of Civic Education | The student will develop the skills essential for acting as a participating citizen | The student will understand the ways in which the different social groups that compose society may receive recognition and take part in national field | The student will develop individual analytical skills needed in order to better understand the unjust reality of society | The student should possess an authentic feeling of belonging to the state |

Utilizing the Four Conceptions of Civic Education

This review of the existing literature regarding the field of civic education may be utilized due to the use of the method of ideal types, which enabled the arrangement of the various themes on the theoretical matrix. This yielded four conceptions of civic education that in reality do not occur separately but rather relate to one another in varying manners, ranging from harmonious to discordant, thus the advantage of this model as an analytical device.

For example, one may utilize these four conceptions in order to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of civic education at a given place and time. This comparison to the four conceptions may reveal that one conception is emphasized more than the others, thus determining the character of civic education at that given case. On the other hand, one may find that different components of several conceptions exist parallel to one another, a reality that may result in unproductive contradictions. In the same manner, future policy may be determined based on a desired conception.

In addition, these conceptions may be utilized in historical studies as well, aimed at understanding the development of civic education at a given setting throughout the years. One may find for example that the character of civic education shifted and thus, the historical roots of the subject are no longer of use to the contemporary reality. An additional avenue of research is

the comparison between different national and cross-national settings. In this manner, the influence of different factors on a national dominant civic education conception may be compared and evaluated.

Furthermore, these conceptions may be of use in studies aimed at attaining a better understanding of the ways in which civic education plans are implemented in the classrooms. For example, based on Thornton's (1991) notion of the teachers as curricular-instructional gatekeepers, one may ask of the connection between the teachers' holding of a solid and coherent conception of civic education and the enhancement of the teaching of civics and government studies. Another avenue of research may travel beyond the realm of civics, citizenship and government lessons. Based on the assumption adopted by the US National Council for the Social Studies (Schneider & National Council for the Social Studies., 1994) that civic education should be seen through a wide lens relating to numerous subject matters, the distinction between these different conceptions of civic education may be crucial when utilized across the social studies curriculum in subjects such as history, geography and economics.

In sum, with the use of the method of ideal types and the construction of the four conceptions of civic education, I hope to offer a means to further clarify crucial distinctions in the logic underlying research and practice. This new conceptual framework may be seen as the starting point for additional much needed empirical studies in this important field. I am hope that this will enhance the education of the world's future generation of democratic citizens.

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