

Critique and Analysis: “Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need to Do,” by Kahne & Westheimer

(Kahne, J., & Westheimer, J. (2003). Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need to Do. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 85 (1), 34-40, 57-61, 63-66. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20440498>)

Kahne and Westheimer offer a useful framework for thinking about and teaching Democracy in a Social Studies classroom. They use three pillars that they describe as essential for successful education in Democracy. The pillars are as follows:

1. Civic Commitment

- a. Students must be shown that society needs improvement and work on projects that demand students to engage with a problem and take steps to solving it.
- b. Example: Examine a current event or issue in the news and ask students to how they would solve this issue. Try to find real world examples that affect students on a daily basis.

2. Capacities

- a. In order to be taught to engage with democracy, students must be first taught civic skills. These skills are often best taught through workshops or simulations that slowly build a students capacity.
- b. Example: Lead a simulation that requires students to build a civic skill, such as activism. A lesson shouldn't try and teach these skills in a vacuum but instead use real-world content to teach skills.

3. Connections

- a. Teachers need to provide a supportive community of peers as well as adult role models. These figures should be people that have made a positive influence on the community or larger world through democratic processes.
- b. Example: Start a role model program that connects youth to positive figures in the community.

This article is particularly useful to a high school teacher as it debunks the myth that all you need for democracy education is a volunteer program. The authors note that volunteering by itself does not engage students with democracy and politics. It may create students who love to volunteer but not those that want to work towards improving society.

One potential problem with the ideas put out by Kahne & Westheimer is that their ideas may be incredibly difficult to implement. Finding current events or issues that affect student's daily lives could be difficult. Finding mentors/role models could be even harder. Once an effective an strong Democracy education program is established the benefits are clear.

Kahne & Westheimer provide an overall useful framework with which to approach social studies education and democracy in particular. They advocate the need for dialogue and engagement. Unless young people are devoted to democracy, our system as it exists will stagnate.

Reference List

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