

Thu, January 31, 2008

An education in nationalism

By LAURA CZEKAJ, SUN MEDIA

Canadian students are not being exposed to the types of controversial discussions in the classroom that are the building blocks for maintaining a healthy democracy, says a soon-to-be-released study.

Tomorrow's citizens and political leaders are receiving inadequate preparation for being effective democratic citizens because schools are keeping the discussions that promote critical thinking out of the classroom, it says.

The study by Joel Westheimer, research chair in the sociology of education at the University of Ottawa, compares the way U.S. and Canadian curricula and classrooms teach patriotism.

The research outlines two forms of patriotism being taught in classrooms: Authoritarian, which teaches that everything the country does is right and those in power are doing what is best for the populace; and democratic patriotism, where students are taught the love of democratic principles and the importance of defending the rights of the people, both in that country and around the world.

The presence of democratic patriotism in Canadian curriculum guidelines is strong and appears to encourage critical thinking. However, in practice, discussion and debate about controversial issues in classrooms rarely occurs.

"Often controversial issues are avoided or not discussed to the extent that they could be," said Westheimer. "For a democracy to flourish, kids need practice in discussing controversial issues because that's what democracy is about -- dealing with differences."

In addition, the current focus in Canadian schools on standardized testing, which is largely based on math and literacy skills, has pushed social studies to the edges of the education system.

In the U.S., the freedom of social thought and ability to criticize government actions has lessened in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ongoing Iraq war.

The concept that "You're either with us, or against us" has reared its head in some classrooms across the U.S., resulting in a flurry of teachers being suspended or fired because of political expression.

More states are also taking an increasingly authoritarian approach to teaching patriotism in schools.

Joseph Kahne, dean of the School of Education at Mills College in Oakland, Calif., said that while there are organizations in the U.S. striving to promote educating students for democracy, those priorities are marginal to mainstream school reform.

"Schools are getting a clear message from the federal government that this is not a priority," he said. "There is nothing wrong with focusing on math and literacy skills but a cornerstone of the purposes of public education are to prepare people for a democracy."



SUN MEDIA

News

YOUR TURN

Should patriotism be an important part of the Canadian school curriculum?

Yes		84%
No		16%

Total Votes for this Question: 1866

RESULTS