

**WHAT WOULD BE DIFFERENT ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A  
CANADIAN SCHOOL THAN IN THE SCHOOLS OF A COUNTRY GOVERNED  
BY A ONE-RULING-PARTY DICTATORSHIP?**



## WHAT KIND OF CITIZEN? DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUES IN EDUCATION

If students from a totalitarian nation were secretly transported to a Canadian classroom to continue their lessons with new teachers and a new curriculum, would they be able to tell the difference? I do not ask this question facetiously. It seems plausible, for example, that a good lesson in multiplication, chemistry, or a foreign language might seem equally at home in many parts of the world. So what would be different about teaching and learning in a Canadian school than in the schools of a country governed by a one-ruling-party dictatorship? Do students here learn how to participate as democratic citizens in decisions that affect all of our lives?

Most of us would like to believe that they do. While a school in North Korea, China, or Iran might be teaching students blind allegiance to their nation's leaders and deference to the social and political policies those leaders enact, we would expect that schools in Canada or Finland or the United States would teach students the skills and dispositions needed to evaluate for themselves the benefits and drawbacks of particular policies and government practices. We would not be surprised to learn, for example, that North Korean children are taught to abide by an 'official history' handed down by President Kim Jong-il and his single-party authoritarian regime. A school curriculum that teaches one unified, unquestioned version of 'truth' is one of the hallmarks of totalitarian societies. Democratic citizens, on the other hand, are committed to the people, principles, and values that underlie democracy – such as political participation, free speech, civil liberties, and social equality. Schools might develop these commitments

through lessons in the skills of analysis and exploration, free political expression, and independent thought. And Canadian schools often support democratic dispositions in just such ways.

But teaching and learning do not always conform to democratic goals and ideals. Tensions abound, and in recent years some of the very foundations of democratic engagement such as opportunities for independent thinking and critical analysis have become less and less common. If being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social assumptions, then that foundation of citizenship is at odds with several recent trends in education policy.

My colleague Sharon Cook and I run a research collaborative based in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa called *Democratic Dialogue* ([www.DemocraticDialogue.com](http://www.DemocraticDialogue.com)). The teachers, students, and university researchers associated with *Democratic Dialogue* are all interested in the role schooling plays in strengthening democratic societies. We conduct studies to investigate the many different ways schools are fulfilling (or not fulfilling) their historic democratic mission to foster an educated citizenry, capable of informed engagement in civic and political life. These studies indicate a clear and troubling trend: much of current education reform is limiting the ways teachers can develop the kinds of attitudes, skills, knowledge, and habits necessary for a democratic society to flourish.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the goals of K-12 education have been shifting steadily away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and towards more narrow goals of career prepara-



**EN BREF** Si les élèves d'un pays totalitaire étaient secrètement transportés dans une classe canadienne, verraient-ils une différence? Les deux classes pourraient fort bien engager les élèves dans des activités bénévoles au sein de la collectivité, ce qu'il faut bien sûr encourager, mais cela ne correspond pas pour autant à la citoyenneté dans une démocratie. Certaines conceptions de la citoyenneté couramment enseignées dans nos écoles – comme l'obéissance et la loyauté – peuvent nuire à la forme de réflexion indépendante nécessaire dans une démocratie efficace. Actuellement, la vaste majorité des programmes scolaires qui prennent le temps d'enseigner la citoyenneté mettent l'accent, soit sur les valeurs morales – dont l'importance du bénévolat et de l'aide aux personnes dans le besoin – soit sur les connaissances techniques concernant les législatures et le fonctionnement du gouvernement. Il est moins courant que les programmes scolaires enseignent aux élèves à réfléchir aux causes profondes de l'injustice ou à remettre en question les normes sociales, économiques et politiques existantes pour renforcer la démocratie.

tion and individual economic gain. Pressures from parents, school boards, and a broad cultural shift in educational priorities have resulted in schools across the country being seen primarily as conduits for individual success, and, increasingly, lessons aimed at exploring democratic responsibilities have been crowded out.

In many boards and provinces, ever more narrow curriculum frameworks emphasize preparing students for standardized assessments in math and literacy at the same time that they shortchange the social studies, history, and citizenship education. Moreover, there is a 'democratic divide' in which higher achieving students, generally from wealthier neighbourhoods, are receiving a disproportionate share of the kinds of citizenship education that sharpen students' thinking about issues of public debate and concern. Curricular approaches that spoonfeed students to succeed on narrow academic tests teach students that broader critical thinking is optional.

#### **DIMINISHING DEMOCRACY**

The effects of such trends are easy to spot. Canadians' knowledge about public issues, and perhaps more importantly, their ability to connect particular perspectives on these issues to political parties and candidates, is not what it should be. In the 2004 federal election, which party or candidate wanted to use half of the budget surplus for health care and social programs? Which party hoped to adopt a national prescription drug plan? Which wanted to repay the national debt? Which hoped to lower income taxes? Which party was against affording Quebec 'distinct society' status? Even at the time of the 2004 election, a majority of Canadians were unable to answer these questions correctly. In fact, out of 15 such questions, only one in ten respondents correctly associated more than three of the positions with the correct party.<sup>2</sup> Other kinds of knowledge important for meaningful political participation in a democracy fare poorly as well. Knowing the names of major political leaders and contenders, how parliament functions, how social policies have been implemented in the past, and basic historical facts about Canada and global affairs all elude a large number of Canadians. If, as Rousseau asserted, the right to vote should be accompanied by an obligation to be knowledgeable in public affairs, our democracy might be in trouble.

Of particular relevance to educators, all the trends that lead politicians and pundits to talk about the growing 'democratic deficit' are seen in sharpest focus among youth and young adults. And behaviours long associated with an ability to think critically about complex policy decisions are also in decline. For example, only 11 percent of Canadians, ages 18 to 24, reported following the issues that arose in



the 2004 federal elections at all. The most recent Canadian Election Survey showed that only a small fraction of those under 30 years old were able to name a political party that would be able to deal with their number one concern. Although there is some indication that youth are engaged in interest-group and charitable volunteering activities in higher numbers, a number of prominent studies seem to demonstrate that, overall, young people are participating less in local and national political affairs associated with democracy than did their counterparts of previous generations. Volunteering among youth, for example, is generally on the rise. But voting rates also tend to serve as a proxy for declines in other forms of participation: after studying data collected by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, Brenda O'Neill concludes that younger Canadians are "less likely to follow politics closely; are less politically knowledgeable; [and] are less likely to see voting as an 'essential' democratic act."<sup>3</sup>

If history is any example, we can also expect that trends emerging from U.S. education policy chambers are soon to arrive – perhaps in diluted form – here in Canada as well. That should raise alarm bells given the series of reforms passed under and in the wake of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. In June 2006, for example, the Florida Education Omnibus Bill included language specifying that,

The history of the United States shall be taught as genuine history... American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable.<sup>4</sup>

Other provisions in the bill mandate "flag education, including proper flag display" and "flag salute" and require educators to stress the importance of free enterprise to the U.S. economy. But I am most concerned with the stated goal of the bill's designers: "to raise historical literacy" with a particular emphasis on the "teaching of facts." For example, the bill requires that only facts be taught when it comes to discussing the "period of discovery" and the early colonies. Florida is perhaps the first state to ban historical interpretation in public schools, thereby effectively outlawing critical and democratic thinking.

Of course, historians almost universally regard history as *exactly* a matter of interpretation; indeed, the competing interpretations are what make history so interesting. Historians and educators alike have widely derided the mandated adherence to an 'official story' embodied in the Florida legislation. But the impact of such mandates should not be underestimated – especially because Florida is not alone. The high stakes testing mandated by NCLB has further pushed to the margins education efforts that challenge students to grapple with tough questions about society and the world. In a recent study by the U.S. Center on Education Policy, 71 percent of U.S. school districts reported cutting back time for other subjects – social studies in particular – to make more space for reading and math instruction.<sup>5</sup> Last June, historian David McCullough told a U.S. Senate Committee that because of NCLB, "history is being put on the back burner or taken off the stove altogether in many or most schools." An increasing number of students are getting little to no education about how government works, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the evolution of social movements, and U.S. and world history. As Peter Campbell, Missouri State Coordinator for FairTest, noted:

**ANY STUDENT DENIED KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HISTORICAL EVENTS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS MISSES OUT ON IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITIES TO LINK HIS OR HER EDUCATION TO THE QUINTESSENTIALLY DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLES FOR A BETTER SOCIETY.**



[T]he sociopolitical implications of poor black and Hispanic children not learning about the Civil Rights movement, not learning about women's suffrage, not learning about the U.S. Civil War, and not learning about any historical or contemporary instance of civil disobedience is more than just chilling. It smacks of an Orwellian attempt not merely to rewrite history, but to get rid of it.<sup>6</sup>

The implications Campbell describes are not limited to poor black and Hispanic students and, it seems, are not limited to American students. Any student being denied knowledge about historical events and social movements misses out on important opportunities to link his or her education to the quintessentially democratic struggles for a better society for all.

In Canada, too many schools have become oriented toward pedagogical models of efficiency that discourage deeper consideration of important ideas. The relentless focus on testing and 'achievement' means that time for in-depth critical analysis of ideas is diminished. Current school reform policies and many classroom practices too often reduce teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to take principled stands that have long been associated with democracies. Many of the researchers conducting studies in collaboration with *Democratic Dialogue* have become concerned that students are learning more about how to please authority and pass the tests than how to develop convictions and stand up for them.

**WHAT KIND OF CITIZEN?**

All is not bleak when it comes to educating for democratic understanding and participation. Many teachers across the country conduct excellent educational activities concerned with helping students become active and effective citizens.

But even when educators are expressly committed to teaching 'good citizenship', there is cause for caution. My colleague Joseph Kahne and I spent the better part of a decade studying programs that aimed to develop good citizenship skills among youth and young adults. In study after study, we come to similar conclusions: the kinds of goals and practices commonly represented in curricula that hope to foster democratic citizenship usually have more to do with voluntarism, charity, and obedience than with democracy. In other words, 'good citizenship' to many educators means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbours, and helping out at a soup kitchen – not grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions that every citizen in a democratic society needs to understand.

In our studies of dozens of programs in the United States, we identified three visions of 'good' citizens that help capture the lay of the land when it comes to citizenship education: the *Personally Responsible Citizen*, the *Participatory Citizen*, and the *Social-Justice Oriented Citizen*.<sup>7</sup> These three

visions can serve as a helpful guide to the variety of assumptions that fall under the idea of citizenship education. As Table 1 illustrates, they also lead to very different program decisions.

*Personally Responsible Citizens* contribute to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteer to help those less fortunate, whether in a soup kitchen or a senior centre. They might contribute time, money, or both to charitable causes. Both those in the character education movement and those who advocate community service emphasize this vision of good citizenship. They seek to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work, or they nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer community service.

*Participatory Citizens* participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state/provincial, and national levels. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government and other institutions (e.g., community based organizations, churches) work and about the importance of planning and participating in organized efforts to care for those in need, for example, or in efforts to guide school policies. While the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive.

The *Social-Justice Oriented Citizen* is an individual who knows how to critically assess multiple perspectives and who examines social, political, and economic structures and explores strategies for change that address root causes

of problems. These are critical thinkers, and this vision of citizenship is the least commonly pursued. We use the term 'social-justice oriented' because programs focusing on this type of citizenship emphasize the need for citizens to be able to think about issues of fairness, equality of opportunity, and democratic engagement. They share with the participatory citizen an emphasis on collective work related to the life and issues of the community. However, they make independent thinking a priority and encourage students to look for ways to improve society and become informed about a variety of complex social issues. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about ways to effect systemic change. If participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food, social-justice oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.

Currently, the vast majority of school programs that take the time to teach citizenship emphasize either good character – including the importance of volunteering and helping those in need – or technical knowledge of legislatures and how government works. Character education is one of the fastest growing components of provincial education frameworks in Canada. Far less common are school programs that teach students to think about root causes of injustice or challenge existing social, economic, and political norms as a way to strengthen democracy.

Voluntarism and kindness can be used to avoid much thinking about politics and policy altogether. If that's the

**Table 1: Kinds of Citizens**

	<b>Personally Responsible Citizen</b>	<b>Participatory Citizen</b>	<b>Social-Justice Oriented Citizen</b>
<b>Description</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acts responsibly in their community</li> <li>• Works and pays taxes</li> <li>• Picks up litter, recycles, and gives blood</li> <li>• Helps those in need, lends a hand during times of crisis</li> <li>• Obeys laws</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts</li> <li>• Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or to clean up environment</li> <li>• Knows how government agencies work</li> <li>• Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures</li> <li>• Explores strategies for change that address root causes of problems</li> <li>• Knows about social movements and how to effect systemic change</li> <li>• Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice</li> </ul>
<b>Sample Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributes food to a food drive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps to organize a food drive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes</li> </ul>
<b>Core Assumptions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question and change established systems and structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time.</li> </ul>

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case, then in terms of *democratic* citizenship, these programs are severely limited. Character traits such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility for one's actions are certainly valuable for becoming good neighbours and citizens. But, on their own, they are not about democracy. A growing number of educators and policymakers promote voluntarism and charity as an *alternative* to social policy and organized government action. Former U.S. President George Bush Sr. famously promoted community service activities for youth by imagining a "thousand points of light" representing charitable efforts to respond to those in need. But if young people understand these actions as a kind of noblesse oblige – a private act of kindness performed by the privileged – and fail to examine the deeper structural causes of social ills, then the thousand points of light risk becoming a thousand points of the status quo. Citizenship in a democratic community requires more than kindness and decency.

#### DEMOCRATIC EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Recall my opening question: If students from a totalitarian nation were secretly transported to a Canadian classroom, would they be able to tell the difference? Both classes might engage students in volunteer activities in the community – picking up litter from a nearby park, perhaps, or helping out at a busy intersection near a school or an old-age centre. Government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship: don't

do drugs; show up to work on time; give blood; help others during a flood; recycle; etc. These are desirable traits for people living in any community, but they are not about democratic citizenship. In fact some conceptions of personal responsibility – obedience and loyalty, for example – may work against the kind of independent thinking that effective democracy requires.

Schools have long been seen as essential to support the development of democratic citizens. For democracy to remain vibrant, educators must convey to students that both critical thinking and action are important components of democratic civic life – and students must learn that they have important contributions to make. Democracy is not a spectator sport.

The exit of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, dedicated to a critical history of war, bears the following inscription:

History is yours to make. It is not owned or written by someone else for you to learn... History is not just the story you read. It is the one you write. It is the one you remember or denounce or relate to others. It is not predetermined. Every action, every decision, however small, is relevant to its course. History is filled with horror and replete with hope. You shape the balance.

I suspect many readers could imagine a lesson in democracy that begins with just such a quotation. |

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#### Notes

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- 4 See [http://www.flssenate.gov/data/session/2006/Senate/bills/bill\\_text/pdf/s0028.pdf](http://www.flssenate.gov/data/session/2006/Senate/bills/bill_text/pdf/s0028.pdf)
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- 7 J. Westheimer and J. Kahne, "What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy," *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (Summer, 2004): 237-269.

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