

INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

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Fola and Titi Soboyejo were so eager to cast their ballots in the January 23rd Canadian Federal election that they spent thousands of dollars to make it happen. The two Nigerian immigrants to Canada passed their citizenship test in the summer of 2004, but because their hometown of Yellowknife has such a small population, it holds swearing-in ceremonies only once each year. That would not have been soon enough for the Soboyejos to vote in the upcoming election. On a snowy Wednesday in January, they spent \$3000 of their own money to fly their family from Yellowknife to Edmonton to attend a swearing-in ceremony. By Thursday they were Canadian citizens, in time to cast their vote. The Soboyejos felt strongly that democracy cannot be taken for granted. "I think that is where my interest really is," Mr. Soboyejo said, "to say that I played my part."¹

As we know from frequently cited statistics on voter participation, not all Canadians feel as strongly as the Soboyejos about playing their part, at least not where voting is concerned. Voter turnout for the 2004 Canadian federal elections was 60.9 per cent, the lowest in the history of Canada (Elections Canada, 2004). Nearly nine million registered voters did not show up at the polls. Voting rates in the U.S.A. show similar declines. Although, in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, there was an upturn in the latest voting rates, these followed a forty year decline, and still only 60.7 per cent of eligible U.S. voters participated. Although in Canada and other democracies voting is certainly not the only form of political participation, especially among youth and young adults, it is a key indicator of political engagement. Several studies have found a strong correlation between voting and other forms of civic engagement such as community organizing and protesting. In fact, many of these other indicators of civic engagement are down as well.

“Democracy is not a natural form of association,” writes University of Maryland political theorist Benjamin Barber (2000), “it is an extraordinary and rare contrivance of cultivated imagination” (p. 221). If people are not born democrats, then education surely has a significant role to play in ensuring that democrats are made. Despite millennial debates over the meaning and potential for democracy, most philosophers, political theorists, and educators agree that citizens of a democracy engage in decisions that affect their lives. And we have no shortage of such pressing decisions. In the past year alone, Canadians have wrestled with a host of social policy concerns that call for the kind of rigorous public debates that are the hallmark of democracy. During the 2004 general election, for example, access to adequate health care figured as the highest priority issue for 32 per cent of Canadians.² We witnessed explosive debates about commitments to a social contract that has in many ways distinguished Canada from its southern neighbor. At the time of this writing, the nature of this very social contract is under debate in the newspapers, on television, and in the House of Commons. Other issues feature prominently as well. Concern over trust in government and political leaders, the growing national debt, and calls for democratic reform of the political process itself are all ongoing policy debates that vie for public attention.

In many ways, these debates mark the health of one of the world’s more respected democracies. Politicians express varying positions on issues of public concern. The media carry a variety of views and perspectives. Through election campaigns, a free press, and community discourse, politicians and the broader public debate policies most prominent in the minds of the people they are likely to affect. Ideally, as Aristotle envisioned, democratic citizens thus move themselves and each other “from individual ignorance to collective wisdom” (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p. xi).

However, as Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996) point out in their study of U.S. citizens’ political knowledge, the quality of the public debate on such issues and thus ultimately the “quality of the reforms that emerge, depend on two things: the nature of the information brought to the public marketplace and the ability of citizens to use that information to discern their interests and to articulate them

effectively" (p. ix). Unfortunately, recent studies indicate cause for concern on both counts. Canadians' knowledge about public issues, and perhaps more importantly their ability to connect particular perspectives on these issues to political parties and candidates, is disturbingly low. 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? 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 (Gidengil, Blais, & Nadeau, 2004, pp. 57-67).

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 (Gidengil et al., 2004). If, as Rousseau asserted, the right to vote should be accompanied by an obligation to be knowledgeable in public affairs (Rousseau, 1762/1968, p. 57), our democracy might be in trouble.

Perhaps more disturbing is that 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. As Brenda O'Neill reports from her study of youth participation, younger Canadians are "less likely to follow politics closely; are less politically knowledgeable; [and] are significantly less likely to [vote or] see voting as an 'essential' democratic act" (O'Neill, 2001, p. 15). Although some of these differences can be attributed to stage-of-life, it is becoming increasingly clear that the decline in participation among youth constitutes a profound generational shift: young people are participating less in community, local, and national affairs associated with democracy than did their counterparts of previous generations.

WHAT'S EDUCATION GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Although everyone seems to agree on the need to address the so-called democratic deficit among youth, the questions echoing in the halls of parliament, on the pages of newspapers, in public conversation, and in journals like this one, are:

“What can be done to improve civic engagement?”
“What new programs and policies might help?”
“Where should this happen?”

Not surprisingly, many see education – broadly conceived – as the answer. Both formal educational experiences in schools and those educational experiences that take place outside the formal school setting can play significant roles in nurturing civic and political engagement in children, youth, and adults. Which is the best method or educational site for democratic learning? As in so many questions in education, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Much depends on the specific goals implied by educating for democracy. Democracy means different things to different people, and among educators and school reformers, the aspects of democracy seen as most important and the best methods for furthering these goals both vary a great deal. Some believe that the best way to teach democracy is through rigorous study of the workings of government, the history of democratic institutions, and the hard-won struggles in which democratic societies have engaged to preserve and strengthen democracy. Others hope young people will go outside the classroom into the community so that academic goals can be better matched to social and community projects. Still others want schools themselves to become more democratic; these advocates point to the presumed hypocrisy of teaching about democracy in a profoundly non-democratic institution like the traditional school.

The articles appearing in this special issue take up a broad range of democratic goals and approaches to achieving these goals through education in Canada and elsewhere. Specifically, the articles consider curriculum and educational policies that seek to foster democratic learning, visions of citizenship that both teachers and students hold, and community-based approaches to education for democratic citizenship.

CURRICULUM AND EDUCATION POLICIES FOR DEMOCRATIC LEARNING

Not surprisingly, many see schools as the preferred location for civic/democratic education because no public institution has the capacity to reach a greater number of young people in a sustained and meaningful way. In both Canada and the United States, belief in the fundamental importance of schooling for democracy served as a key rationale for the founding of public education. Kathy Bickmore examines the provincial guideline documents underpinning three curricular areas where civic values and knowledge are explicitly taught in schools: English language arts, health, and social studies. The range of her examination is usefully broad: grades 1 to 10 in three provinces, Nova Scotia, Manitoba, and Ontario. By examining the discourses in these documents, she decodes how social diversity, conflict, democracy, and injustice are represented for both teachers and their students. Her findings raise significant cause for concern. She finds, for example, that where conflict resolution strategies are addressed, the treatment is often predicated on simplistic principles, reinforcing "...older, dominant cultural assumptions that implicitly locate problems in certain 'uncivilized' individuals rather than in the struggles for democratic social relations. This may contribute to a kind of social cohesion," she concludes, "but probably not to *democratic* cohesion."

A second article explores the Constitutional Rights Foundation's CityWorks curriculum for United States high-school government classes. Joseph Kahne, Bernadette Chi, and Ellen Middaugh consider whether this particular civics curriculum can increase norms of civic participation, social trust, and knowledge of social networks. The authors find much in this project to recommend, and yet find that it is by no means a panacea: "...the curriculum by itself does not guarantee change. The ways teachers use the curriculum – what they emphasize and how they do it – is also very important." More specifically yet, they point to the potential value of experience-based learning, which, they note, is too rarely found in civics classrooms.

Mark Evans, in his study of teachers' understanding of their roles as civics instructors in England and Canada, notes the importance of political ideology and preoccupations in shaping curricular practices.

He finds that teachers' goals for civics in both countries include knowledge acquisition and skills, although few are specifically associated with civic literacy, such as negotiating and mediating difference. Further, teachers in both England and Canada identified teaching for social justice as important, but defined the curricula and pedagogy in terms that fit with the political culture of their respective nations: English teachers emphasized class inequity, for example, while Canadian teachers explicitly addressed values related to cultural diversity. Although teachers in both countries recognized the importance of active citizenship, all understood civics education as an in-class project, rather than a community-based one.

Gada Mahrouse describes another school-based approach to teaching democratic citizenship; she suggests that increasingly citizenship education is approached through the study of peace and peace making.³ "Given the many common goals and philosophical underpinnings they share," she notes, "this alliance is not surprising. Both peace education and citizenship education seek ultimately to promote non-violence and both encourage active engagement with social and political issues." Through an examination and analysis of a classroom-ready programme (*Cultivating Peace*, available from Classroom Connections), she interrogates the degree to which curricula of this type address the interlocking causes of violence or the ways in which national identity is socially constructed through violence. Although finding much that is valuable in the resource, she draws on Westheimer and Kahne's framework of the good citizen to argue that the vision of the "personally responsible citizen," with all the limitations of perspective which this implies, is persistent and dominant in these types of curricula.

If we are to assess the capacity of schools to undertake the essential and demanding task of educating young people as democratic citizens, it seems important to examine the tensions that underlie these efforts. In a study of the Australian "new civics" initiative of the 1990s, Cosmo Howard and Steve Patton contrast it with the "old civics" programme, the latter emphasizing constitutional foundations of government, structures of operation, and the citizen's compliant position within this "formalistic construction." The "new civics" speaks a language of

inclusion and democratic consensus, with active citizens providing for themselves and contributing to equitable communities. In fact, Howard and Patton argue, civic culture is so deeply embedded in political ideology (which has not become markedly more egalitarian, in their view) that the prescription for the new-style democratic citizen is not dramatically different from the old. Intense global competition has maintained neo-liberalism at the root of Australian civic culture, they posit, despite the claims of inclusion, democratized power relationships, and empowering critical reflection.

Beyond the mandated curriculum and teachers' interventions in the construction of civic education is the network of administrative practices that school officials utilize, particularly when competing rights clash and demand resolution. Shaheen Shariff presents an analysis of the difficult choices that school officials must make around these competing interests, all of which are protected to some degree by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Of special note are those interests rooted in religious belief in opposition to secularism in a rapidly changing Canadian landscape that features a far wider diversity of religious orientation than even a decade ago. Shariff presents a complex case study along with a "stakeholder model" to aid in the fair and democratic decision making that, she argues, must be present if educators are to foster truly democratic school environments. Shariff reminds us that schools are ultimately reflective of individual community norms, as well as the broader Canadian culture, and that often, the two do not easily coexist. Somehow, both components must be represented within the school walls if democratic education is to be a reality.

VISIONS OF CITIZENSHIP

Another critical element of democratic education is the sense made of it by the students to whom it is directed. Students of democratic education approach instruction through the lens of their own experiences, hopes, and fears. Two articles in this collection investigate adolescent students' views of Canadian civic culture. Jennifer Lee and Yvonne Hébert examine the views of two populations of Calgarians: first-generation and non-immigrant adolescents. They find the definition of Canadian citizenship is contested, but comprised in both populations of four

separate but interconnected factors: national identity, a regime of rights (devolving from membership in Canadian society), political and civic responsibilities, and socio-cultural and supranational belonging. Despite differences in the two groups of students' sense of the importance of these four factors, mainly according to the significance of original national identity, the authors conclude that "a diversity of ethnocultural identities does not necessarily diminish association with the national identity in Canada."

Otilia Chareka and Alan Sears provide a second examination of adults' and students' views. These authors take voting rates by youths as a key indicator of the much-discussed retreat from civic participation. They argue that "to be effective, civic education programs have to be developed with some attention to the conceptions students already have of important civic ideas." To address this factor in the current anxiety about student disengagement, they consider the reported views of civic participation of recent African immigrants to Canada with a group of native-born Canadians. Their findings include a general reluctance on the part of all participants to participate in formal political activities, including joining political parties or running for office. Non-formal, community-based activities were the preference of all. Despite recognizing the vote as a key element of a democratic state, and demonstrating both knowledge and concern about civic issues, youths from either group were unlikely to vote.

The implications for formal civic education are obvious and challenging. The students' voices as reflected through these two articles remind us that the consumers of civic education construct their own meanings about Canadian citizenship norms and privileges, despite the intentions of official guidelines, curricula, or administrative practices, and that young people will not willingly participate in a process from which they can see little benefit.

COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES TO EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

To the extent that teachers, policymakers, and community activists agree that education has an important role to play in developing democratic citizens, they do not necessarily agree on the kinds of programs to

pursue or on where these programs should take place. Some observers believe that the community is the prime site for democratic education and that it should be utilized more commonly than is now the case.

In her article, Jacqueline Kennelly argues that historical and current definitions of citizenship have strictly prescribed class, gender, and sexual standards in defining the normal Canadian citizen. Exclusionary constructions of Canadian citizenship are mirrored by a bland educational programme for training citizens where high-sounding rhetoric of creating global citizens is delivered by traditional methods of deference to authority, respect for patriotic symbols, and the like. To demonstrate a more activist approach and one grounded in community-based concerns, she cites Headlines Theatre's staging of "Practicing Democracy" in Vancouver where participants debated and collaboratively solved problems through dramatic presentations that were distinctive to their own community.

Kaela Jubas offers a second extra-curricular site in this issue where we can learn about current definitions of citizenship for Canadians. She looks to the powerful role of the media in its presentation of the Greatest Canadian Contest. By analyzing the discourse surrounding this television event, she concludes that this informal but powerful educational vehicle presented disturbing lessons about visions of the ideal Canadian citizen in terms of gender, race, and other qualities, as well as the limited possibilities for realizing social justice through liberal democracy.

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This issue of the *Canadian Journal of Education* on Democracy and Education, then, is devoted to these concerns: Where should education for democracy take place and what kinds of programs and practices seem most promising? What educational goals seem most important to increase the democratic quotient in society? What do we know about the current state of democratic education in terms of official policy, mandated curricula, administrative practices, and very importantly, students' views and proclivities? At the same time, these articles raise other questions: Who should determine the appropriate goals of

democratic citizenship and the education programs aimed to pursue those goals? Are compulsory civics courses adequate to educate young citizens about democracy, its dimensions, promise, and limitations? If not, how do other formal educational initiatives coexist to support—or hinder—the broader project of democratic engagement? If so, what should this education look like? Where else does education for democracy occur, and what are the implications of these intersections? To what degree is democratic education distinctive to a specific nation, civic culture, style of governance, or economy? How transferable to new settings are projects to promote democratic education?

Some articles in this issue advocate for one kind of goal or another. It behooves educators to take the arguments for these various categories of democratic goals seriously. Evidence shows that – rhetorical arguments aside – pursuing one kind of vision of citizenship does not automatically advance learning consistent with another vision. Teaching students that there are poor people in Canada does not guarantee a critical examination of economic policy, for example. And although teaching students to help those in need might be important in teaching people to be good neighbors, one might argue that it is not at all about democracy. Indeed, as Kahne and Westheimer argue elsewhere (2003), being generous, honest, and hard working are goals that government leaders in any totalitarian regime are as likely to pursue as those in any democracy. Chinese leader, Hu Jintao, would be as pleased as Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper were all citizens kind and law-abiding. Most important, regardless of what kind of programs colleagues of ours study, we consistently find that reach exceeds its grasp: that claims about teaching towards multiple visions of citizenship often are mismatched to the content and pedagogical approaches employed. We hope that this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Education* will contribute to the academic discussion so necessary to realizing some of these goals.

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When the Call for Papers was published for this issue, we did not anticipate the overwhelming response from the academic community; the quality of submissions was high, and we regret that our capacity to accept articles for the volume was necessarily limited. We wish to thank all of the authors who answered that call. Our research assistant, Alessandra Iozzo, has provided careful and skillful direction for the many manuscripts reviewed for this volume. As she embarks on motherhood and dissertation-writing, we warmly thank her. We also thank *Democratic Dialogue's* project director Karen Suurtamm from whom we received additional assistance reading many manuscript drafts and revisions.

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NOTES

¹ Details about Fola and Titi Soboyejo's case are drawn from CBC news stories, all retrieved April 24, 2006, from www.cbc.ca/story/Canadavotes2006/national/2006/01/11/vote-couple060111.html

² Data from the 2004 Canadian Election Survey. Institute for Social Research, York University. Retrieved April 3, 2006, from www.ces-ec.umontreal.ca

³ In this introduction, and indeed in many of the articles in the volume, the term "democratic education" is often used interchangeably with "citizenship education." Although these terms are not completely comparable, they represent similar types of educational goals and strategies in the minds of many researchers and teachers.

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