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Hindrances to Democratic Public Schools

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Abstract

One of the fundamental, underlying promises of public schooling in the west is that schools are to promote democratic citizens. However, in light of low voter turnout, rapid change in technologies, teacher workload, student disengagement and a host of other ills, that promise is under question. It is important to examine these and other hindrances to democratic pursuits in order to bring them to the forefront, to examine why these barriers exist and to offer possible directions or solutions to ridding our public educational system of them. Although curriculum documents appear to hold democratic goals in high regard, democracy itself is quickly negated in a seemingly vast educational agenda that works to thwart those very goals. Teachers can foster democratic classrooms by giving students freedom and choice in personally relevant and creative projects. It is important that students learn to negotiate with others.

Keywords: democracy, citizenship, public education.

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The English Language Arts 8 curriculum guide for Newfoundland and Labrador public schools all reference the words “citizen” and “citizenship” (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2011). However, they are referenced in a nonchalant manner as if everyone shares an agreed-upon understanding of these highly complex and often politically loaded words (a conservative may have a different understanding of “citizenship” than a liberal). The word “democracy” is not used at all. This paper explores definitions of democracy and citizenship and what it means to foster democratic citizenry. Another key focus is on public schools and if they are actually achieving this stated curricular goal. Specifically, this paper targets key factors that impede democratic thinking and citizenship.

Popular culture would have us believe that this generation of school-aged youth are “disengaged” or “disenfranchised”. Another popular notion is that this is the “most entitled” generation. If these are even remotely accurate statements that describe our current public school students, then our democracy is precariously delicate.

The research question behind this paper is: What are the hindrances to fostering citizenship in public schools? This serves to clarify and highlight the pitfalls in our current educational systems which would appear to thwart the development of strong democratic citizens. It is important for educators to understand the general outcomes related to democracy, how to best meet those outcomes and to be leery of practices that snuff them out in our budding, future citizens.

Rationale

The assumption in this paper is that democracy is the preferred social model over other models such as communism, dictatorship or anarchy. Giroux (2009b), a leading expert in the field of democracy and education, addresses this very issue. He argues that,

[r]ather than expanding the realm of freedom, neoliberal economics has brought us the financial crisis of 2008 along with an egregious number of housing foreclosures, a ruinous increase in personal bankruptcies, the loss of millions of jobs, and devastating cuts in state budgets and social services, all of which add up to an exemplary case of greedy financial markets out of control. (p. 4)

Giroux references other political experts who have argued that “the United States has displayed the earmarks of an authoritarian regime” (p. 4). He describes how that occurred.

After September 11, 2001, the United States moved even more rapidly away from a liberal democracy toward a punishing society. Bush's policies nourished and strengthened a number of antidemocratic forces, fostering a distinctive type of authoritarianism in the United States, including the militarization of everyday life, an imperial presidency, the use of state-sanctioned torture, the rise and influence of right-wing Christian extremists, and a government draped in secrecy that was all too willing to suspend civil liberties. (pp. 4-5)

Giroux keeps coming back to this theme that democracy is somehow a delicate thing that can be suspended or simply ignored whenever there is a terrorist alert or, even when capitalism requires that it conveniently disappear. “[T]he future has been re-calibrated according to market calculations, effectively dissolving its primary commitment to children and its economic moorings” (p. 28). This re-calibration extends to a widening class disparity, a weakened social state and a failing democracy (p. 65).

Despite all these American references, we can find similar trends here in Canada. Hurtig (2009) published a national bestseller just on such Canadian statistics, pointing out that wage disparity is just as big a problem here. He informs us that “the top 5.7 percent in 2005 owned over 97 percent of all family wealth. The bottom 94.3 percent together owned less than [...] 3 percent” (p. 85).

All told, foreign corporations took almost 31 percent of 2005 profits and an estimated 34.1 percent of 2006 profits. In 2005, over \$22.3-billion of foreign-controlled corporate profits left Canada, mostly for the United States. (p. 88)

Hurtig (2009) also addresses the growing issue of voter turnout. “[I]n May 2004, Fair Vote Canada reported that for the decade of the 1990s, Canada ranked all the way down in the 109th place in voter turnout” (p. 330) among all other democratic countries. Many educational critics have grappled with the meaning behind low voter turnout. O’Neill (2005/2006) puts forth the argument that people “may be choosing not to vote quite simply because they are satisfied with the state of political affairs” (p. 41). Conversely, “the decision not to participate may be due to political cynicism or a belief in the irrelevance of politics” (p. 41). She summarizes these opposing reasons as both being causes for concern as they are both a clear indication that our “democratic system is not functioning properly” (p. 41).

This detachment and inaction may, indeed, have more severe consequences. Judt (2010), an authority on recent European history, questions why liberal Austria collapsed during the 1930s into dreaded fascism. The culprit, he argues, is the indecision of socialists. The fascists at the time, *acted*. “The problem was that socialists had too much faith in both the logic of history and the reason of men. Fascists, being uninterested in both, were supremely well-placed to step in” (p. 99). Judt (2009) arrives at some very ominous observations about democracies with lethargic, inactive citizens,

Governments that are too weak or discredited to act through their citizens are more likely to seek their ends by other means: by exhorting, cajoling, threatening and ultimately coercing people to obey them. The loss of social purpose articulated through public services actually increases the unrestrained powers of the over-mighty state. (p. 119)

Judt (2009) also points to an “age of insecurity” (p. 8). Back in 1914, just as events were conspiring to bring us World War I, many experienced economic, physical and political insecurity. He argues that “[i]nsecurity breeds fear. And fear – fear of change, fear of decline, fear of strangers and an unfamiliar world – is corroding the trust and interdependence on which civil society rests” (p. 8-9).

Judt (2009) often focuses on the notion of trust,

Clearly we cannot do without *trust*. If we truly did not trust one another, we would not pay taxes for our mutual support. Nor would we venture very far outdoors for fear of violence or chicanery at the hands of our untrustworthy fellow citizens. Moreover, trust is no abstract virtue. One of the reasons that capitalism today is under siege from so many critics, by no means all of them on the Left, is that markets and free competition require trust and cooperation. If we cannot trust bankers to behave honestly, or mortgage brokers to tell the truth about their loans, or public regulators to blow the whistle on dishonest traders, then capitalism itself will grind to a halt. (p. 37-8)

Judt (2009) also quotes the great social critic, Jane Jacobs, who argued that trust cannot be institutionalized. “Once corroded, it is virtually impossible to restore” (p. 67). Held (2006), an expert on the history of democracy, adds to this idea of trust in his comments about law. According to Held's (2006) findings, “[l]aw is 'better observed by every citizen' if each one is involved in 'imposing it upon himself’” (p. 38). This same issue of trust can be applied to teachers too and the mistrust that standardized curricula or standardized exams reflects upon their so-called autonomy in the classroom, when standardization creates cookie-cutter leadership – where every leader is shaped to look and act the same, regardless of contextual and site-based needs, teachers and principals become technicians on an assembly line of education – turning out cookies or widgets or children who also must look and act the same, all measured, sorted, and ranked

using comprehensive high-stakes, content-based exams. Such is the creeping hegemony of standardization when democratic wisdom is hammered down by mistrust. (Nichols & Parsons, 2011, p. 52)

Finally, the strongest rationale for studying the health of a democracy are those educational experts who describe having a “sense of crisis” (Hébert & Sears, 2001, p. 4). This stems from a review of policy and practice in citizenship around the world where youth are described as ignorant (not enough basic information to function as citizens), alienated (cut off from political life), and agnostic (a value system too insufficient to underpin a democracy) (p. 4). Fusarelli and Young (2011) add that “disenfranchised students become disenfranchised adults – adults less likely to vote, participate in voluntary organizations, or sustain our democracy through civic action” (p. 90). So, educators have a huge responsibility resting on their shoulders. The future health of a civil, democratic society would seem to hinge on what transpires in their classrooms.

Definition

Given the complex history of democracy, its many forms, and even the multifaceted views on what democracy means to so many people, it is important to examine how educational experts define democracy and what citizenship means. In so doing, it will provide a greater clarity and focus. Although there are many definitions that are often subjective, elusive or abstract, everyone seems to agree on the many requirements or foundations upon which a viable democracy is sustained.

First, Giroux (2009b) explains that,

Democracy is not simply about people wanting to improve their lives; it is more importantly about their willingness to struggle to protect their right to self-government in the interests of the common good. Sheldon Wolin has rightly argued that “[i]f democracy is

about participating in self-government, its first requirement is a supportive culture of complex beliefs, values, and practices to nurture equality, cooperation, and freedom”. (p. 65)

Straight away, with this definition, there is a splitting of hairs. One would assume that democracy is about the interests of the individual. But, the first sentence above goes beyond that. It references the “common good”. In other words, a democracy is the individual's recognition of others toward what is best. Democracy should not be selfish or egocentric. It is the deliberate act of carefully considering what is in the better interest of the needs of the many above the needs of the one. This is at odds with the historical Renaissance republican model. According to that model, the freedom of citizens consists in their unhindered pursuit of self-chosen ends; and the highest political ideal is the civic freedom of an independent, self-governing people (Held, 2006, p. 34). Here is the greatest disagreement between the various definitions of democracy. Libertarian ideals (pure individualism) come into some conflict with the common good. All of our modern arguments come from this sticking point. Here is just one example: One can be against abortion, but allow it for others, sensing that they should be free to do so. Or, one can be against abortion and actively stop others from doing so.

Yet other academics can break down democracy into sections or subsections: “For the social democrat, true democracy means, among other things, equality of opportunities in economic, social, and political aspects of life. People should have the right to determine their future in all three of these domains” (Prince, 2003, p. 2). There may even be flaws in this definition if one considers the über-rich (fair economics?), royalty (fair society?) or big oil lobbyists (fair politics?). This definition almost requires that capitalism be removed from democracies. It is perhaps for this very reason that Giroux (2009a) provides more nuanced definitions of democracy and the individual's role within it stating, “higher education is more than an investment opportunity, citizenship is about more than consuming,

learning is about more than preparing for a job, and democracy is about more than making choices at the local mall” (p. 14).

Another approach is to describe the ideal of what public education could produce in a citizen. Character education should highlight the “importance of character development, becoming a productive member of a democratic society, and contributing to the common good within a larger community [where there] are both rights and responsibilities” (Washington, Clark and Dixon 2008, p. 65). They add later that “democracy entails certain habits of the mind that must be cultivated throughout citizens' lives as they participate in various institutions and groups in which they have a voice in setting goals, sharing knowledge, communicating, and taking direct action” (p. 67). This description is especially interesting because it suggests that being in a democracy requires a particular way of thinking. This has major ramifications for student meta-cognition. If public education promises to foster democratic citizens, then the students within that system must think about democracy itself and their place in it. That discussion has to be at the forefront, those specific words have to be used (democracy and citizenship) and it should be discussed more often than not. As mentioned earlier, the word 'democracy' does not even appear in the Newfoundland and Labrador English Language Arts curricular documents.

There are some academics who believe that schools, by their very nature, are automatically democratic. As a public space, “teachers and students are exposed to each other as equals in relation to a book, a text, a thing” (Masschelein and Simons, 2010, pp. 679-80).

There is a deep egalitarian or even democratic structure in schools. Indeed, leaving the private sphere of the family and entering the school building implies entering a space and time where particular roles, positions, customs and backgrounds are suspended and where all people are equally exposed to common things in view of new and free use” (p. 680).

This notion should be comforting to all educators – that there is no need to stress or even highlight democracy in the classroom or worry about student meta-cognition (as mentioned earlier) as public schools are the great levelers. The very structure and use of the institution with its common books, free tuition, and egalitarian membership, makes it democratic by default. That would negate the purpose of this paper. It would also not satisfy the curious trends that seem anti-democratic in low voter turnout, the widening gap between the rich and the poor in Canada and the uneasy feeling that citizens just feel powerless. There is an obvious disconnect here.

Part of that disconnect can be found in the Laguardia and Pearl (2009) paper. They caution us against laying too much blame at the feet of public education with regards to failing democracy,

American economic competitiveness with Japan and other nations is to a considerable degree a function of monetary, trade, and industrial policy, and or decisions made by the president, Congress, the Federal Reserve Board, and the federal department of the Treasury and Commerce and Labor. Therefore, to contend that problems of international competitiveness can be solved by educational reform, is not merely Utopian and Millennialst, it is at best foolish and at worse a crass effort to direct attention away from those truly responsible. (p. 355)

Laguardia and Pearl (2009) provide an even more nuanced definition of democracy, admitting that it “has many meanings” (p. 353). They break democracy down into seven principles:

- the nature of authority
- inclusiveness
- equal availability of the understanding required for deliberating the most serious challenges to democracy and livability
- equal access to centers of political decision-making

- guaranteed inalienable rights
- equality
- universal access to an optimum learning environment

However, they qualify these seven principles by stating that,

We understand that such a democracy is unattainable, but we believe democracy is served as progress is made toward implementing fundamental democratic principles. Moreover, it is our belief that each of these principles can be applied in differing degrees in any classroom to the benefit of both students and society. (p. 353)

Above all, Laguardia and Pearl (2009) focus their paper on independent thinking and to “learn how to solve difficult problems with logic and evidence” (p. 360). Despite their lofty, seven principles, they still bring the ultimate responsibility back to the individual and their internal capacity to reason. They call for skills such as presenting a coherent argument, listening to the argument of others, persuading others, being open to the persuasion of others, negotiating differences, and mobilizing support for a particular proposal. These aspects, they argue, are the “heart and soul of deliberative democracy” (p. 360). Finally, they tell us that this kind of citizenship can be learned through practice in every public school classroom from kindergarten to grade twelve.

Hindrances

Where all concerned parties can get very close to a consensus on the definition of democracy, they are wildly at odds when it comes to the reasons for its failure. These range from the nature of public education as an institution, all the way to the supposed evils of capitalism, mistrust of teachers, and right-wing (and even religious) thinking.

Perhaps the most extreme and radical view comes from an older source by Ivan Illich (1970). In his text, he argues that the level of care provided by some professionals and their respective institutions (he specifically mentions truant officers and expensive medical beds) makes citizens “dependent on more treatment, and renders them increasingly incapable of organizing their own lives around their own experiences and resources within their own community” (p. 4). Indeed, it is often heard in elementary classrooms, “three before me”, meaning, ask yourself first, a friend second and check your text book before you ask the teacher. In other words, teachers have to employ self-help strategies because they recognize that far too many students become incredibly dependent upon them. As radical as Illich (1970) may be, there are elements of truth that ring true for educators.

Public schools, he adds, have an “anti-educational effect on society” because “school is recognized as the institution which specializes in education” (p. 8). He also states, “if schools are the wrong places for learning a skill, they are even worse places for getting an education. School does both tasks badly, partly because it does not distinguish between them” (p. 17). Again, many schools, suffering under fiscal restraints and strained resources have to make do with paper and pencil and theoretical constructs when they would prefer to construct and produce. For the sake of efficiency, it is always better for students to follow teacher instructions. That helps to understand Illich's (1970) next passage,

Once a man or woman has accepted the need for school, he or she is easy prey for other institutions. Once young people have allowed their imaginations to be formed by curricular instruction, they are conditioned to institutional planning of every sort. “Instruction” smothers the horizon of their imaginations. (p. 39)

Henry Giroux (2009b) takes an entirely different approach because his line of attack is generally toward the evils of unregulated capitalism. He claims that we now have “the emergence of a

one-dimensional society” and “the growth of an image soaked hyper-reality that obliterates the distinction between the real and the imaginary” (p. 40). Here, Giroux (2009b) is talking about mass media that has primarily negative effects on today's youth. He goes on to say that we are in a “consumer society” that “has made young people the target of its massive and diverse strategies of consumption and commodification and what the latter implies for rethinking the very nature of agency, democracy, and politics itself” (p. 40). Corporate culture has robbed youth of their access to democracy by limiting their thinking. Youth are now too focused on consumerism and fabricated issues that have nothing to do with their own reality or regional needs. Giroux (2009b) uses hyperbole when he writes that “American youth are commercially carpet bombed through a never-ending proliferation of market strategies that colonize their consciousness and daily lives” (p. 41).

This capitalist propaganda becomes a major hurdle for teachers to overcome. “Teachers struggle for the attention of their students for at most twenty or thirty hours a week, perhaps thirty weeks a year, in settings they do not fully control and in institutions that are often ridiculed in the popular media” (pp. 48-9).

Giroux (2009b) also speaks of new trends that are perhaps disturbing, but goes on without too much critique or analysis. Specifically, he references 'lock-down drills' and 'SWAT team' rehearsals (p. 96). Giroux (2009b) is correct to point out that “[a]s schools define themselves through the lens of crime and merge with the dictates of the penal system, they eliminate a critical and nurturing space in which to educate and protect children in accordance with the ideals of a democratic society” (p. 102). He qualifies this sentiment with this superb quote,

Criminalizing youth behaviors, policing schools, punishing children by depriving them of an education, constricting social protection for abused and neglected youth, and subjecting youth to law enforcement as “social service” - these trends smack of social injustice, radical

inequity, dehumanization, and fear-filled demonization of youngsters, who are our prospective hope. At stake here is the civic will to invest in our common future by seeing other people's children as our own. (p. 105)

John Dewey (2009) wrote, perhaps, the most famous and influential book on democracy aptly called “Democracy and Education” in 1916. This book is so great because Dewey believes in rejuvenation of culture through experimentation and first-hand, practical experiences for public school children. There is also the famous distinction between “reproducing” (bad) and “recreating” (good) society. Dewey was very much against holding onto traditions just for the sake of traditions. He was very much into new thinking, fresh ideas, and innovation.

However, the most striking aspect of Dewey's famous work is his thinly veiled disdain for religion. Despite being an obviously controversial topic, it does serve an important function to view his criticisms of religion as a hindrance to democracy and see if there is any merit in this bold position.

Dewey (2009) writes,

[a] society which rests upon the supremacy of some factor over another irrespective of its rational or proportionate claims, inevitably leads thoughts astray. It puts a premium on certain things and slurs over others, and creates a mind whose seeming unity is forced and distorted” (p. 66).

The best way to make sense of this passage is to apply it to some modern irrational claim. Take for instance gay marriage. Most religions are against gay marriage. The United States even created DOMA (Defense Of Marriage Act) to specify that marriage was a union between a man and a woman. Would Dewey have said that DOMA was “forced and distorted”, to use his own phrasing? Dewey's philosophy would have been to apply fresh thinking to this and his approach would be to rely heavily

on science and fact. This kind of fact-based thinking would recognize that some people are born gay. As a true democrat, the Dewian approach would be to accept them as equal citizens.

At other times, Dewey (2009) displays difficulty in hiding his disdain for religion, especially when he writes, “spiritual culture has usually been futile, with something rotten about it” (p. 91) or when he refers to “heathen religion” (p. 165) or “sentimental magic” (p. 263).

Dewey (2009), having written this 100 years ago, had to tread very carefully. Even today, one has to be extra cautious when criticizing religious dogma or even broaching the subject. Democracies, after all, are about negotiating differences, learning to work together and accepting other viewpoints. But, for Dewey (2009), unhindered, free thought on part of the individual was also important. This core belief can be found in the following statement: “True individualism is a product of the relaxation of the grip of the authority of custom and traditions as standards of belief” (p. 227). It simply was not good enough for Dewey (2009) to accept something because society has always done it that way. Not only is this kind of thinking a logical fallacy, such is the path to stagnation and a barrier to democratic thinking.

Some modern thinkers have not been so guarded as Dewey about religion. Laguardia and Pearl (2009) write,

Clearly a democratic education must address efforts to impose religious dogma on curriculum that can take the form of an attack on evolution, sex education, and science itself. Ideology continues to play a major role in efforts to achieve racial, gender, and class justice. The issue of peace and war, never adequately discussed in school, takes on greater complexity when religion becomes a major justification for war. (p. 365)

Held (2006) adds to this sentiment when he writes that Hegel believes “it is only with the progressive emancipation of individuals from religious, ethical and coercive political restraints that a

fully distinct civil realm emerged” (p. 104). Giroux (2010) provides us with a modern update on this same concern. He warns us about current right-wing fundamentalists (i.e. Fox News and Glenn Beck) who “live in circles of certainty” (p. 6). Their flavour of populist appeal rejects “enlarged ways of thinking, thoughtfulness and the exercise of critical judgment” (p. 6). Such discourse, argues Giroux, creates “zombie politics in which deliberation is blocked and the ethos of democracy is stripped of any meaning” (p. 6).

However, this push to completely free the individual within a democracy does have its detractors. Not all critics share Dewey's high regard for “true individualism”. Others have interpreted that individualism has run amuck and have labeled it “corrosive” or “neoliberal” in its current form. Corbett (2009), in his paper that deals with rural schools in Atlantic Canada, has stated,

The focus on liberal individualism led to the development of social institutions that inculcate competitive, self-interested values, which in turn end up supporting industrial capitalism, social fragmentation, and atomization. In the case of education, the result has been a commodification of learning, with heavy emphasis on testing and competition for individual advancement. Meanwhile, the communities in which individuals live have come to be increasingly meaningless and tangential to the central business of personal advancement. The ultimate result of this ethos, and the economic and social practices that follow from it, is that rural places come to be marginalized in a modern society just as rural labour is marginalized within an industrial economy. (p. 237)

This is especially applicable to western Newfoundland which has lost one industry after another (Canadian National Railways, fish plant closures and a constant threat of closure of the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill). Corbett (2009) also highlights a curious paradox telling us that “[r]ural communities need better-educated populations if they are to prosper in contemporary economic

conditions. In other words, rural communities need the kinds of people who are most likely to leave” (p. 243). So, unlike Dewey, Corbett (2009) would seem to call for more community-minded individuals. Indeed, perhaps a society of such civic-minded citizens would be a greater boon to democracy. When one considers the marvelous contributions of Sir Wilfred Grenfell to northern Newfoundland and southern Labrador (the construction of orphanages, cottage hospitals, personal house-calls, children's books and even the invention of Grenfell cloth), one can see that the benefits are self-perpetuating and long-lasting. Pure individualism, without a sense of community, would seem to serve the opposite – death of rural life and community. In a more extreme view, Karl Marx believed that democratic government was not even possible within a capitalist society (Held, 2006, p. 103).

Another surprising hindrance to democracy is possibly the curriculum itself. Keith Morrison (2008a), in his paper, argues that, “[c]ognition is not simply the acquisition of new knowledge: it engages motivation, personalities, learning styles, dispositions and preferences, the whole person. Teaching and learning take place at the intersection of the individual and society, and the outcomes are unpredictable” (p. 26). He adds that, “[p]edagogy is not transmissive or delivery-based – that is for assembly lines – but cast in a language and practice of 'possibility', of openness, freedom, autonomy and exploration” (p. 27). In other words, students must go beyond the curriculum. Students must learn to evaluate conflicts between the needs of the one and the needs of the many (the individual versus society). They must learn that there has to be a balance. Moreover, that balance requires its citizens to constantly re-evaluate itself through negotiation. This explains why smoking in public places has been banned and why it took so long for that law to come into effect, to be accepted by citizens and to be acted upon by them. But, other issues between the individual and the public are ongoing. Debates rage on about public breastfeeding for example. So, strict adherence to curriculum, facts, and knowledge is not sufficient. Democracy is much more complex.

Some theorists even go so far as to suggest that we should use 'complexity theory' as a framework to help us re-examine the classroom, given that all “human settings and activities are necessarily complex” (Mason, 2008, p. 10). Certainly, that complexity needs to be embraced within the classroom by immersing students in reasoned debate, fact-finding, negotiation, and counter-argument. This needs to be ongoing throughout the school year. Teachers cannot “cover” democracy in a class or two.

Other educators lament the lack of deep thinking that is required for democratic citizenship in classrooms across Canada. Westheimer (2010) argues that,

democratic societies require more than citizens who are fact-full. They require citizens who can think. If we are to take education's democratic goals seriously, then we need the kind of classroom practices that teach students to recognize ambiguity and conflict in 'factual' content, to see human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and to embrace debate and deliberation as cornerstones of democratic societies. (p. 6)

He adds that “myopic testing in math and literacy” make it “more and more difficult to make time for deep consideration of important ideas and controversies” (p. 6).

Other areas of concern seem to be out of the control of educators, but equally important to keep in mind. Namely, the lack of social and cultural capital (Franke, 2010) plays a major role in hindering the development of democratic citizens. Franke (2010), in her research paper for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, highlights the fact that,

many youth do not have full ability to act, either because of certain personal traits (such as age or language), their interpersonal skills, or because of certain economic or social circumstances. Thus, youth with a lack of social or cultural capital may feel limited in their ability to exercise their citizenship. Other youth may feel alienated by their living

conditions and choose not to get involved in social life, with potentially serious consequences for their sense of belonging and their identification with the community. The feeling of being excluded may also lead them to take on other group identities, including those of self-exclusion (and sometimes anti-social or even violent) counter-cultures whose values and norms conflict with those of predominant social institutions. (p. 36)

Clarke, Dixon and Washington (2008) echo this concern over personal capital, stating that “poverty can impede children's cognitive development and their ability to learn and can contribute to behavioral, social, and emotional problems” (p. 64). This links directly back to earlier comments about wage disparity and the growing gap between the rich and poor. These concerns have a direct impact upon the state of a democracy. Capital (or lack thereof) also affects the school itself. Rozycki (2008) points out that the general public does not share a common concept of educational efficiency beyond “lowest cost” (p. 13). He adds that “calls for specific approaches to school rationalization, i.e., reform, have always been the pet project of the few - that is, non-democratic” (p. 13). This may be more common in the United States where local taxes fund schools and there is perhaps a wider gap between rich and poor schools. Here in Canada, education is the jurisdiction of the provinces, although some disparity between schools in the same region does exist.

Teacher workload can also have an indirect influence upon what happens in the classroom and it too has subsequent effects upon fostering democratic citizens. Nichols and Parsons (2011) state that,

[t]his intensification limits democratic opportunities for teachers in two ways. First, teachers may have no time to share their professional judgments or ideas in working groups, committees, or dialogues. Second, time constraints mean teachers are so preoccupied with the immediate decisions of their work that they are unable to stay current with research. Such intensification contributes to limiting or silencing teacher voices and

perspectives or, perhaps more to the point, pushes teacher concerns toward more pressing needs. (p. 49)

It is also unhealthy for teachers to rely more on outside processes and materials because they become “progressively more technical in their teaching approaches and less knowledgeable in their professional discourses” (p. 50). This results in teachers becoming less likely to engage in democratic dialogues or to do so wisely (p. 50). Other experts agree with this concern over teacher workload. Some have said that it pushes teachers into a “mode of incessant busyness” that generates “professional amnesia” (Hansen, 2006, p. 21).

Finally, the last word on the hindrances to democracy must be given to Laguardia and Pearl (2009) who wrote that,

[i]f we lose our democracy it will not be because it is overthrown or because a small group of terrorists destroyed it. It will be because the citizens, the persons who had the benefits of at least 12 years of education, didn't know enough to preserve it. (p. 365)

Fostering

The good news is that each of the educators and experts quoted so far have even more to say about how to fix these hindrances to democratic public schools. So, this section begins with hope:

Whatever the reason why a person may attach himself to a cause, more enthusiasm for its pursuit is likely to be elicited if it looks as if it has a chance of succeeding than if it appears to be a forlorn hope. Nobody likes to feel that he is wasting his time, and that feeling may be induced by contributing to a campaign which never looks as if it has a chance. (Barry, 1988, p. 30)

This simple premise applies to all stakeholders: parents, teachers and students. If educators can instill a “can do” attitude, much can be accomplished. Held (2006) believes that this carries through to low voter turnout stating that, “those who express a lack of interest in politics do so precisely because they experience 'politics' as remote, because they feel it does not directly touch their lives and/or that they are powerless to affect its course” (p. 139). So, somehow, teachers need to make success and politics more accessible. Giroux (2009b) expands upon this idea stating that,

[m]aking education central to any viable notion of politics as well as making the political more pedagogical suggests that intellectuals, artists, community workers, parents, and others need to connect with young people in those public and virtual sites and spheres that not only enable new modes of dialogue to take place but also work to move beyond such exchanges to the more difficult task of building organized and sustainable social movements. (p. 66)

Later, in the same text, Giroux (2006b) puts it another way - that democracy has to be “nourished by pedagogical practices” that enable young people and others to give it the kind of “active and constant attention that makes it an ongoing, never-ending process of replenishment and struggle” (p. 182).

Democracy, he reminds us, is a way of life.

Gaudelli (2009) provides two basic suggestions to foster democracy in the classroom. First, he calls on us to engage in “an endless hermeneutic cycle of dialogic exchange, where 'the hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things and is always in part so defined” (p. 114). Secondly, he cautions us to never forget about the importance of listening,

The problematic of listening is often ignored in curricular discussions of democratic education. There is a paucity of attention to listening with so much attention about the right to speak in the post-Enlightenment liberal tradition. Yet listening matters profoundly,

particularly when we view visual text discourse in light of hermeneutics, or interpretation.

Listening in a democratic vein “actively strives to understand the meaning of others in their terms. (p. 127)

Giroux (2009a) also has pointers for the curriculum. He believes that “the content of the curriculum should affirm and critically enrich the meaning, language, and knowledge forms that students actually use to negotiate and inform their lives” (p. 17). But, he also recommends that “educators need to become provocateurs; they need to take a stand while refusing to be involved in neither cynical relativism or doctrinaire politics” (p. 17). This may sound like a tall order, and perhaps a contradiction, but what it suggests is that teachers should provoke students to think and get excited about ideas, all while keeping one's own politics at bay. And one's own politics may, from time to time, become cynical. Even some very great people let that cynicism slip out in public,

George Washington referred to commoners as “the grazing multitude,” and John Adams referred to them as the “common herd of mankind,” and Alexander Hamilton doubted people's moral capacities. However, these students of the Enlightenment also believed in the power of learning and education. This belief created in them a more optimistic attitude toward human potential. (White, Van Scotter, Hartoonian and Davis, 2007, p. 229)

Teachers also need to know how to sustain democratic discourses in their classroom and be comfortable with it. “[T]o foster a democratic culture that encourages dialogue, young people must become accustomed to participating in an exchange of ideas across multiple public associations” (Kennelly, 2006, p. 549). It is for this reason that both teachers and students watch their local NTV or CBC news each night at supper. Newfoundlanders should get to know not only the names of their MHAs, but the names of others as well. But, Newfoundland students should also know the key

industries. Once, it was sufficient to know local businessmen, but with globalization, their world has become that much more complex and they need to greatly expand their horizons.

Some experts have elaborated upon this, demanding even greater skills.

Skills in reading, writing, and numeracy are essential for responsible and effective democratic citizenship, but increasingly media literacy is vital for responsible, participatory citizenship in democratic societies. As suggested by multiple sources, the typical literacies taught in schools often are disconnected from those literacies our students find most interesting and which actually are central to their everyday lives. (Burroughs, Brocato, Hopper and Sanders, 2009, p. 165)

In other words, students almost have to be a 'jack of all trades'. They need to see themselves in a new Renaissance where they should find themselves excited by many endeavours, subjects, skills and the classroom has to be a starting place for this excitement.

This excitement can have modest beginnings. Webeck, Hasty and French (2006) found in their study that even journals and iMovie documentaries evoked compelling “ways in which students articulated ideas” (p. 81). They elaborate,

The steps of developing a private voice through which a student begins to speak is necessary for participation in public political processes and vital to the dimensions of enlightened political engagement: political engagement and democratic engagement. Students moved from expressing concern about their voicelessness and powerlessness at effecting political change to creating a product that clearly articulated their opinions about political issues during the election process. (p. 81)

They summarize this finding by stating that “[i]t is hard to understand democratic processes if one does not have experience in a democratic environment” (p. 82). Others have added that “people who

are given freedom and choice will ultimately become better democratic citizens because they have learned how to negotiate with others, to name obstacles, and to know themselves” (Morrison, 2008b, p. 54). In other words, students' voices will emerge if they are given some autonomy. Once these voices come together, there will be places for negotiation. The balance between the individual and society will be met. Democracy will have occurred in the class and citizenship will have been fostered.

Conclusion

Democracy is a highly complex social structure. It is this way because it involves a multitude of different voices, each with different values. It is also surprisingly fragile and can easily be taken away or destroyed. Generally, this happens through lethargy, but that lethargy can come from many sources, including impoverished educational ones. This impoverishment can come from too strict an adherence to facts in the curriculum, lack of student and teacher autonomy and lack of a negotiation within the classroom.

Experts tend to agree about what a robust democracy looks like. Where they tend to disagree is on how to build one. Democracy has to be underpinned by trust and a well-rounded educated public. That entails many, many skills, most of which involve language arts and the areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening. But it also requires reasoning and avoiding the pitfalls of narrow-mindedness, absolutism, and corrosive forms of individualism.

Unfortunately, this all falls into the laps of teachers who have to walk into a classroom and somehow construct democratic environments with which to foster the next generation of democratic citizens. Teachers have to accomplish this with increased workloads, a student body that is increasingly indoctrinated by corporate culture, mass media and who may be lacking in social or cultural capital.

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