

Democratizing our Youth: Citizenship, Community and Governance

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that the inherent flaw in the current Ontario civics curriculum is that it is too heavily influenced by the functional aspects of 'what is' Canada, rather than giving the opportunity to experience the emotional qualities of what it means to be Canadian. Creating a community of learners based on the caveats of citizenship and good governance is the key element to the revitalization of a deteriorating democracy.

Over the past decade it seems as though various levels of government have attempted to figure out why our youth are so unmotivated to cast a ballot on election day. Campaign after campaign, pundits highlight youth apathy and discuss various ways of changing the functional process of elections, or different ways to try and persuade youth to vote.

In an attempt to figure out why the youth of the nation were voting less and less, ElectionsCanada held a *National Forum on Youth Voting* in October of 2003. Representatives of various youth organizations, other non-governmental organizations, and the Chief Electoral officer all met to discuss this problem. After keynote addresses, small group discussions were used to formulate possible solutions. Their recommendations included: improved access, improved voter registration, youth outreach, greater use of technology, and civics education. ^[1] The federal government, working with provincial ministries of education, believed teachers required more extensive training on civics, and that civics education needed to "start in lower grades" (Elections Canada 2004, 32). While this may be seen as a laudable goal, the functional aspects of civics education are already extensively covered in the Ontario curriculum.

Once students are able to recite the provinces, territories and their respective capitals, and understand the mechanics in the process of voting, teachers feel that their jobs are done and the Curriculum expectations have been met. For example, the Ontario social studies curriculum focuses on familiarizing students with the fundamentals: In grade 2, students need to have an idea of where their community is in Canada; grade 3, students learn about rural and urban communities and work to define how they coexist in contemporary Canadian society; grade 4, students learn about Canada's physical characteristics, knowing Canada's provinces, territories and general geographic regions; grade 5, students learn about the systems of government and how they function at various levels; and in grade 6 students discover how Canada connects to the world (Ministry of Education 2004, 38-47). Even in the most formative years Ontarian children should be well-versed in the mechanics of defining Canada. From this basic overview of the various aspects of the nationhood, students should have the foundation for a subsequent Civics education.

Schools have continually sought to define what it means to be Canadian. At the high school level Civics is given greater priority and is addressed explicitly. In Ontario, the Civics curriculum contains multiple strands: informed, purposeful, and active. In the curriculum document, the Ministry outlines how students "are encouraged to identify and clarify their own beliefs and values, and to develop an appreciation of others beliefs and values about questions of civic importance" (Ministry of Education 2005, 63). The objective of the Civics curriculum seems relatively clear – students are to define their own political beliefs based on mutual understanding and respect for those around them. Where this objective becomes questionable is when ascertaining *questions of civic importance*. We have to wonder: to whom are these questions important? – are they meaningful? – are they relevant? To what extent are students given the opportunity to actively engage in the process of learning through critical thought and inquiry? These are areas which the curriculum documents become ominously silent.

There are several factors one must take into account when assessing the effectiveness of the Ontario Civics curriculum. The idealistic notions of Liberalism form the basis of the education system. Liberalism is intently focused on the ability of the individual to flourish when given the same opportunities to succeed as everyone else. The

emphasis is placed on the individual and their ability to succeed against others within society. Thus a dichotomy is created where the individual measures their successes or failures based on the successes and failures of those around them. The system as it exists makes it difficult to place the needs of others ahead of one's own. The education system as a whole reflects this conflicting duality since "social structure . . . has little choice but to be internally competitive as well as [externally] collaborative" (Jonathan 1997, 75). By placing the needs of the individual ahead of the larger whole, students lose their vested interest in the cohesion of the collective. In the classroom, this duality plays out when a teacher gives out marks and students compare with each other to see how they did. It has been contended that these conflicting dualities in the Curricula are not only necessary, but desirable as they "provide for a rich and fulfilling civic life or a compelling civic education" (Bull 2008, 450). To successfully argue this point, one assumes a base desire to be adversarial and the belief that people are fundamentally prone to conflict. The existence of Liberalism, with its spotlight on the individual, reinforces the self-focused perceptions of the youth and further prevents connection with society and community. However, it still needs to exist within the pluralistic framework.

Another significant aspect one must take into account when assessing the effectiveness of the Ontario Civics curriculum is the perception that Canadians lack an inherent sense of national consciousness. As a result we have continually, and quite consciously, struggled to define what it means to be Canadian. Consequently, Canadian schools both deliberately, and to some extent accidentally, opt to promote Canadian nationalism at the expense of allowing the student to explore the dynamism of how they influence and interact with society. Miroslav Hroch described what is happening as a necessary part of the "fermentation-process of national consciousness" (Alter 1994, 56) whereby the various social institutions, especially the education system, work to impart unifying similarities which serve to define the social and political organizations that constitute the nation state. ^[2]

In the development of national consciousness, social groups emphasize the various commonalities we have mentioned – language, culture, religion, political ideals, history – and tone down other local or universal political or religious ties that might sap their unity (Alter 1994, 12).

The community which comprises the nation is effectively being ignored. In that regard, schools act as agents of social homogenization, creating good citizens of Canada – not necessarily good citizens of Georgetown, Sudbury or Arnprior. What is happening in Ontario schools is that teachers are providing the basis of the functional aspect of how Canada works. What they are failing to address is the aesthetic of what it means, or feels, to be Canadian. This phenomenon can likely be used to describe other similar jurisdictions, as voter turnout seems to be an issue garnering increased attention throughout Canada and much of the western world. What has to happen in the Canadian curriculum is a détente between educating students based on the formalized political hierarchy, and allowing students to discover their own political identity and develop a sense of citizenship.

In a recent article published in *The Educational Forum*, authors Alazzi and Chiodo (2008) discussed their study of how Jordanian students perceived citizenship. While it asked several poignant questions about how students felt about their role as citizens, it is worth mentioning in this context because in educational research the opinion of the student is often missing. What they found is that "students are altruistic and believe that citizenship is best defined as service to others in their community" (Alazzi and Chiodo 2008, 279). The difference between Canadian students and Jordanian students might be seen as a difference between students' perception of the conceptual and the concrete. The Jordanian community defines their daily lives and provides them with a concrete theoretical framework to define their role within society. In contrast, the Canadian nation state as it exists is an abstract, conceptual idea, where students see it as existing on the periphery of their daily lives. Students do not identify themselves as part of the national consciousness, but instead define themselves as part of their lived experience, as members of their communities.

A feeling of connectedness is at the very heart of the matter. In 2004, the Law Commission of Canada released a report addressing the issue of electoral reform in Canada. In addressing voter apathy among youth, they cited that "many youths do not feel connected to the system of democratic governance" (Des Rosier and Colas 2004, 40). Connectedness is often a result of agency. If students feel as though they have the power to change things related to their education they become invested in the process, essentially becoming advocates of their own learning. When students are exposed to an institution that is heavily influenced by a prescriptive, hierarchical modality there is an inherent conflict that ensues against the more benevolent curricular edict designed to incite them to become engaged and active participants. In this context, the hierarchy they are exposed to on a continual basis invariably wins. As a

result, we contend, students are at an increased risk of becoming disconnected and apathetic to our system of governance because they lack agency in the curriculum.

Rowe-Finkbeiner (2004) notes that even young individuals who are active volunteers in the community, and have intense passions for causes, are not voting. While this may seem like a contradiction, she found that young people are very focused on individuality. If an issue does not immediately affect them, they express apathy. For example, when a political agenda starts to discuss pensions, young people tune out, as they consider this topic not relevant to their lives. They miss the connection that the money to off-set the pension increase may be coming out of their paycheque. However, once the money is removed from a paycheque, the youth become angry. They claim that political decisions are being made at their expense and the political system is not concerned with their well-being. They do not connect their earlier choice not to be involved with the outcome. Focused on individuality, the youth of the Precious Generation miss the connections. Focused on the immediate effect on their lives, they do not foresee how a change in one area affects us all. For suggestions to deal with this situation we return to the work of Rowe-Finkbeiner (2004). She found that once individual, local, established passions, causes and concerns were connected to platforms, parties and people in the political arena, the concerned individuals embraced politics. In short, the topic needed to be viewed as relevant and immediate to their lives. We need to first make the links for our students and then secondly teach them how to make the links for themselves.

The Law Commission of Canada's report also talked about bringing youth into the process of voting. The report stated that, "to develop the next generation of voters, the current electoral system should be adapted to the needs of young people and to the ideas and issues that they find important" (Des Rosier and Colas 2004, 116) This would seemingly denote a paradigm shift in the thinking that governs the political process in Canada. Unfortunately that assertion remains a laudable goal, destined to the dustbin of good intentions. To make things worse, later the report seemingly contradicts itself. It stated that Canadians would need to be educated "about the stakes of electoral reform and the various options to be considered" (161). In implementing a system of electoral reform, they still viewed the process as existing in a top-down structure. The average citizen's opinion – youth or otherwise – is only valuable when it fits within the predetermined structure. In that sense, adapting the education system to become more open and malleable to student input would ultimately serve to have a reflexive impact on the way in which the systems of electoral participation are administered. Furthermore, when systems of political agency become more pliable, people become invested in the process, and they are more likely vote.

To some extent, humans have a tremendous capacity to empathize and relate to those that we believe to be similar to ourselves. When we see ourselves reflected in another person, we make an emotional connection to them allowing us to empathize with them. As a result of this vicarious association, we are often more willing to listen to them even if we have a divergence in opinion. This explains why racial and gender diversity among educators, as well as those in positions of educational leadership, deserves to be addressed. When students fail to see themselves, or their interests, being represented within the school they begin to become disaffected by the social structure they are compelled to follow. In effect, students disengage from these systems of power because they perceive them to be mechanisms of their subjugation. In their article *Developing Urban School Leaders*, Nevarez and Wood (2007) described what they called a "disparity of *proportional representation* of leaders" (270). The level to which students are able to meaningfully participate and engage in the curriculum becomes significantly compromised unless they can relate to someone within its bureaucratic framework.

There is also the issue of *interculturality*, as defined by Rodolfo Stavenhagen (2008). The term describes how culture needs to be viewed beyond the perspective of a stratified and individualized unit of study. Students must be compelled to broaden their horizons by seeing citizenship as an "interaction and dialogue with other such [cultural] units" (162). As a large number of schools lack the basic resources to provide an ethnically diverse staff, to do this effectively within the school environment would have to require community involvement. In instances when students begin to become engaged in their communities, they become exposed to a wider variety of experiences. They see diversity as it exists within their community, begin to relate to others, and gain an understanding of their true capacity to be successful, productive citizens.

In Ontario, the Code of Conduct states, "students are to be treated with respect and dignity. In return, they must demonstrate respect for themselves, for others and for the responsibilities of citizenship through acceptable

behaviour” (Canada Law Book 2006, 814). Citizenship is recognized, at least insofar as the legislation is concerned, as a reciprocal relationship based on mutual respect. While it has been the primary focus of this paper to discuss the political aspect of citizenship, we must refrain from obscuring the social aspect of citizenship (Alazzi and Chiodo 2008, 272). To cultivate socially responsible individuals, students must not only be engaged in dialogue but they must feel that someone is listening.

For students to be heard they must have real power to make real decisions, especially when it comes to implementing the Civics curriculum and participating in community events. Given the opportunity students can effect proactive change within the school environment. In the United States, the Senate and Assembly Committees on Education (SABE) has demonstrated that students can work within the existing institutional frameworks to become facilitators of change within the educational system. As discussed in a recent article, “SABE proposals have led to government action on issues from [Physical Education] requirements to cell phone policies, and we eagerly seize the opportunity to work with adult officials to improve our education system” (Mayer, Anysia; Feuer, Aaron 2008, 17). In this context, the involvement of high school students was regulated by their ability to work with adult officials. In a sense, this could be used to exemplify the lack functional power students have within the bureaucratic structure of a school; however, their example had students implementing a change in educational policy. Working to improve community involvement to promote a sense of citizenship with students would not be as difficult. Students would not be changing anything that would prove to be detrimental to the endemic structure of the education system. Given the opportunity to be involved in the community would allow students to change the hegemonic structure of how they view their role in society, and consequently redefine their intrinsic motivation to become better citizens.

There exists a continual trend towards lower voter turnout. We need to inspire our students to care by recognizing the connections between themselves and civics. Once relevance is established, interest in the decisions being made is the logical next step. Interest in governance is a fundamental right of all Canadians and involvement is fundamental to Canadian citizenry. On October 14th, 2008 Canada held its 40th general election. It was an election that will be remembered, not for the government it elected, but by how few Canadians showed up to exercise their Civic responsibility to vote. Less than 60 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot and set a new record for the lowest voter turnout in Canadian history^[3] (Coyne 2008, 55). As described by Andrew Coyne in an editorial published in Maclean’s: “At some point it will occur to someone: we have a democratic crisis on our hands – a crisis of legitimacy, a crisis of efficacy” (Coyne 2008, 55). The consequences have never been outlined more clearly. Our future is in the hands of today’s youth. Through lack of Civic involvement, our democracy stands at the precipice of elected dictatorship where the fates of the majority are decided by a minority of Canadians.

Notes

[1] Since this conference, Elections Canada has created the position of Student Liaison Officer for each of the 308 ridings across Canada. Their function is primarily to communicate how to register, facilitate targeted revision, and to inform students where and when to vote on College and University campuses. One area this position could be improved would be to have the Student Liaison Officer speak at each of the area elementary and high schools.

² While the terms nation and state are commonly used synonymously, their inherent differences should be clarified for the purposes of this paper. Nation is usually defined as a collection of people with a common identity, who inhabit a specific geographic territory. State, on the other hand, is essentially seen as the structure of political power which governs the nation (Johnston 2002, 22).

³ This statistic is based on the total number of registered voters. Until the 1990s Elections Canada would compile a list of eligible electors for an electoral event by enumeration. After 1996 Elections Canada began to keep the National Register of Electors (NROE) (McMenemy 2003, 101). Recently questions of the integrity of the database been raised as it pertains to duplicates, removals, etc. potentially skewing the actual number of registered voters. In addition, it has also been contended that the list itself might place too much onus on the elector having long-term consequences (Black 2003, 36).

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