

Editorial Notes

Democracy and education: uneasy bedfellows

by Marita Moll



It's all over the papers — young people aren't voting. It's the fault of the media leaving negative perceptions. It's the fault of the school curriculum for not teaching enough civics. It's the fault of Elections Canada for not making registration easy enough. It's the fault of politicians for not addressing youth issues. Are we pinning the blame on the wrong donkey? Maybe the problem is so imbedded in our institutions that we can't really see it.

The dynamic of schools as places where democracy is taught but not practised is deeply entrenched. While medical patients and legal clients have increasingly assumed the role of participants in, rather than just recipients of, both health and legal services, students have not seen a similar change in their role vis à vis the education system. Does this have anything to do with the lack of youth

participation in the electoral process? Well, it probably does.

Educational researcher Alison Cook-Sather says it's a question of trust — “whether or not adults trust young people to be good (or not), to have and use relevant knowledge (or not), and to be responsible (or not).”¹ The frustration this lack of trust causes for today's youth is clear in a letter to the *Ottawa Citizen* by Mike Sornberger, an Ottawa high school student who was serving as a student trustee at the Ottawa Carleton District School Board at the time:

“Teenagers are interested; teenagers watch the world around them. We have opinions, views and

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political leanings. We are people, but are often pigeon-holed as inattentive, uncaring delinquents ... This attitude is common and leads to indifference toward teenagers by some adults. They believe we have no opinion; so any opinion we may express is immaterial.”²

This theme issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* focuses on this dilemma with articles about the relationship between democracy and schools. In our cover article, Joel Westheimer, who holds the Ottawa University Research Chair in Democracy and Education, points out that we need to understand the different types of citizenship. For example, law-abiding individuals and those who challenge injustices by challenging the law can both be called “good citizens.” The former are as likely to be encouraged by leaders in a totalitarian regime as by those in a democracy. The latter, although recognized by democracies as essential to the system, still pose a problem to which police riot squads have recently been the solution. Or have they?

Westheimer points out that different strategies will promote (or not) different types of citizenship. Encouraging students to help the poor does not necessarily lead to a critical examination of economic policies that lead to poverty or vice versa. Similar questions about the kinds of citizen being promoted by various programs appear in articles by Barbara Hillman, Heather-jane Robertson and Desmond Morton. Brian Howe offers a rights-oriented strategy currently being introduced in several jurisdictions.

Educational policy-making processes, whether top-down or participatory, embed goals and objectives that then manifest themselves in programs and curricula. Ursula Franklin has described these processes as technologies of practice. They involve “organization, procedures, symbols, new words, equations and, most of all, a mindset.”³ José Clóvis de Azevedo and Daniel Schugurensky offer a model for Citizen Schools which evolved from the participatory budgeting process in Porto Alegre, Brazil — a mindset which demanded the radical democratization of schools. Laura Pinto compares this model to one closer to home in Ontario — dominated by policy elites and distanced from communities. Heather Menzies observes changes in the patterns of interaction in her university level seminar courses and suggests that our own education system, combined

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with recent social changes, may be leading us to a technocracy rather than a citizenry. We need more classroom dialogue, she says, to reroot our knowledge “back into the realm of living bodies, the life of society and the living earth” — perhaps the kind of dialogue Azevedo and Schugurensky describe.

The words of Cook-Sather and Somberger echo in the early findings of a longitudinal survey on the attitudes of British youth three years after the introduction of a mandatory citizenship education program at the secondary level. “They highlight a generation who are struggling to find meaningful ways to engage in the political process on their own terms ... and, as a result, who lack trust in those who are involved and report on politics,” says David Kerr, Principal Research Officer at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

The role of teachers in this complicated equation is a delicate one which J.C. Couture addresses in his article exploring the lives of teachers as civic educators and teachers as engaged citizens. Recent survey data from Alberta shows that teachers are “simultaneously engaged and disengaged in political processes.” He suggests that better teacher preparation programs based on a better understanding of the psychological processes at work are essential if citizenship education is to be a key goal of the education system.

The answer is blowin’ the wind

If you look closely, there are a few signs of change. The current movement towards student representation on school boards is a small example of “practising what we preach” in citizenship education. Some U.S. school boards have included student representatives since 1975. Currently, students serve on an estimated 10% of public school boards. They have full voting rights in California, Maryland, Massachusetts and Tennessee — including voting on budgetary issues, student discipline issues, and personnel matters. In Quebec, school governing boards do include students as non-voting members. In January 2002, the Quebec government approved new legislation which gives voting rights to cycle II secondary students sitting on school governing boards. In 1995, Ontario’s Royal Commission on Learning recommended “that all boards have at least one student member...,”²⁴ citing the use of student trustees in a few boards at the time. This recommendation became part of the Education Quality Improvement Act in 1997. But the student trustees were not given voting rights and the Act left it up to individual school boards to decide how a representative would be selected and the extent of student trustee influence.

Various programs have been set up to encourage students to participate in mock votes in elections. Jean-Pierre Kingsley, Canada’s Chief

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Electoral Officer, has even suggested that the voting age be lowered to 16 from 18 to slow the decline in youth turnout at the polls. Surely 16 year old Canadians are just as mature as 16 year old Australians and should be allowed to vote in real elections.

Voting and volunteering are some of the characteristics of good citizens. But, as other generations have, today's youth have found their own ways of engaging with the system. Examples vary from the recent LIVE8 concerts and the BC Rock the

Vote campaign to street activity from graffiti to protests that challenge the status quo.

Finally, when the joyful idealism of youth comes face to face with the dower pragmatism of neo-conservative governments, young revolutionaries will emerge from the rubble with a call to action. "Get involved. Society as a whole is not more or less democratic than schools," says Justin Woza Goldenthal-Walters. "If you are not turned on to democracy, it is democracy that turns on you!"

ENDNOTES

¹ Alison Cook-Sather, "Authorizing Students' Perspectives: Toward Trust, Dialogue, and Change in Education." *Educational Researcher* 31, no. 4: 9.

² Mike Sornberger, "Editorial betrays anti-teen prejudice." Letter to the editor. *Ottawa Citizen*, March 9, 2003.

³ Ursula Franklin. *The Real World of Technology*. CBC Massey Lectures Series. Concord, ON: House of Anansi Press, 1992. p.12

⁴ Ontario. Royal Commission on Learning. *For the Love of Learning*. Toronto: 1995.

Marita Moll is the guest editor for this issue of Our Schools/ Our Selves and a member of the editorial board.