Education for CITIZENSHIP

Mandela and the Children, SkyDome, Toronto, Sept. 25, 1998. Photo courtesy of the Toronto District School Board.

By Ken Osborne

WHEN the Manitoba Minister of Education made school attendance compulsory in that province in 1916, he did so in terms of citizenship. Boys and girls, he said, were the citizens of the future and they must attend school to learn how to perform the duties of citizenship. A much later Minister, in that same province, spoke a very different language, explaining a new policy direction in 1991 with these words: "The workforce will demand highly skilled and adaptable workers who have the ability to upgrade existing skills and develop new skills, who can help create and participate in a climate that encourages entrepreneurship, innovation and economic growth; and who can understand the complex dynamics of a competitive global environment."[1]

Here is another juxtaposition covering roughly the same years. In 1925, the influential Putman-Weir inquiry into education in British Columbia concluded that "The development of a united and intelligent citizenship should be accepted without question as the fundamental aim of our schools." In 1987 the Radwanski inquiry into dropouts in Ontario described education as "the paramount ingredient for success in the competitive world economy" and essential to "our very survival as an economically competitive society."[2]

It seems that a world has passed away in education. We no longer see students as citizens but as workers. We value not citizenship and the society that sustains it, but economic success in the global economy. The week before I wrote these words, my local newspaper featured statements from 39 candidates in elections for surrounding school boards. It is perhaps not surprising that, of the 39, the great majority spoke of computers, high-tech, the global economy, excellence, and the other educational buzz words of the moment, and only two even mentioned the word

citizenship. It is in this climate that schools are urged to form partnerships with business, that literature is downgraded to literacy, that history disappears from the curriculum, that knowledge and appreciation are abandoned for skills, that understanding is reduced to performance standards, attainment targets, and intended learning outcomes.

For a decade or more, our policy-makers have taken too narrow and mean-spirited a view of education. Regardless of political party or province, they have converted education into training, and imposed a misguided economic agenda on the schools. At the very time when the country calls out for a new vision of citizenship, our schools have been told to head in another direction. Our policy-makers have, to all intents and purposes, abandoned the very concept of citizenship, which, now as in the past, ought to be at the centre of educational theory and practice.

Until the last 10 or 15 years, the Canadian public school system cohered around the concept of citizenship. Schools existed, and children were compelled to attend them, for the purpose of producing citizens. Definitions of citizenship and approaches to citizenship education changed over the years, but that citizenship was the central goal of schooling was never in doubt.

Initially, in the years before and immediately after the First World War, citizenship was seen in harsh and coercive terms. It was the code word for the assimilation of immigrant children, the First Nations, religious and linguistic minorities, to a unitary and homogenizing view of what it meant to be Canadian. Outside Québec, educationists were convinced that Canada was either already a nation, or was well on the way to becoming one, and that the task of the public schools was to educate the young for national citizenship, English-speaking, British in allegiance, able to cast an informed vote, subscribing to more or less the same social values, and suitably temperate in thought and deed. This notion of citizenship has been described by some historians as the embodiment of Anglo-conformity, and though this characterization is both too simple and too sweeping, it does catch the essence of citizenship education in those early years.

Despite its assimilationist and coercive elements, however, citizenship also carried within it some very different possibilities. If, on the one hand, it threatened forced uniformity in a narrowly defined Canadian nationality, on the other, it offered the promise of democracy, respect for rights, and the chance to participate in public life regardless of personal background. Citizenship has always been a flexibly protean word. It was and is used by conservatives, liberals, radicals, and even revolutionaries, to press their various claims. Citizenship is not static but dynamic. It is shaped by debate and discussion, struggle and conflict. Women fought their way into the citizenship tent, as they won the right to vote, to hold public office and to be constitutionally recognized as persons, as did workers when they won the right to organize, to bargain and to strike, and as now are the First Nations as they negotiate for equity and justice. The rights of citizenship can never be taken for granted. They are won and preserved, and sometimes lost, through struggle and their definition changes with each new generation. The quality of citizenship, which is so vital to the health of democracy, depends on the energy and commitment of citizens.

As a result of this continual process of debate, redefinition, and struggle, definitions of citizenship over the years became more generous and inclusive. Assimilation gave way to multiculturalism; unilingualism to bilingualism; uniformity to diversity — to the point that some commentators today worry that Canada is in danger of falling apart. As ideas of citizenship changed over time, so did approaches to citizenship education. By the 1970s, Canadian citizenship education had come to consist of six principal elements. It aimed to give students, first, a sense of identity as Canadians but also as citizens of the world; second, an awareness of and respect for human rights; third, an acceptance of the responsibilities and obligations of citizenship; fourth, a reflective commitment to broad social values; fifth, the capacity to participate in public life; and, sixth, the ability to think about and act intelligently on the implications of all five of these elements. [3]

This is not to say, of course, that Canadian schools acted as one cohesive force to implement this version of citizenship education, or that all schools saw all six elements as equally valuable. No school system is that tightly organized, least of all in Canada. Teachers have a good deal of autonomy in their classrooms when they care to use it and they often have more immediate things to worry about than teaching citizenship. Today, for example, they have to worry about the physical safety of their students; to see that they are fed; to prepare them for exams and tests. Increasingly, teachers' working conditions force them to think in terms of sheer survival, not of educating citizens. One of the weaknesses of citizenship education over the years has been its inability to penetrate the classroom, to turn its rhetoric into actual practice. Nonetheless, citizenship was, until recently, at the heart of educational policy making.

A moment's thought shows that the six elements of citizenship education that have just been described raise as many questions as they offer answers. It is easy, for example, to say that education should result in students having a firmer sense of Canadian identity than they otherwise would have, but just what does this mean? Is identity the same as national pride or patriotism? In the 1970s the Canada Studies Foundation spoke of "pan-Canadian understanding" and Professor Tom Symons spoke of "knowing ourselves," but what is it that students should know and understand? What

vision of Canada lies at the heart of these questions? Is John Ralston Saul right to say that Canada is not a nation-state in the orthodox European and American sense and that our organizing principle is complexity?[4] Are we one nation, or two, or three or more? Just what does it mean to be a multinational state if that is in fact what we are? Whatever we are, what do we want to be and how do we get there? And in the world of the twenty-first century, how do we combine our sense of national identity with a wider global awareness? Are there limits to national sovereignty and if so, where do we place them and what do we concede and to whom?

Quel est le but de l'éducation ? Dans le passé, le réseau d'éducation visait à former de bons citoyens et de bonnes citoyennes. Au fil des ans, le programme scolaire a changé au fur et à mesure que la définition de la citoyenneté a évolué. De nos jours, on s'attend à ce que le système crée une main-d'œuvre supérieure capable de contribuer à une économie dynamique et compétitive. Ce phénomène récent a moins de mérite qu'un réseau basé sur les valeurs de la citoyenneté.

These are obviously tough and complex questions, but at the same time they are questions that face all Canadian citizens. They faced us in Meech Lake, in the Charlottetown Accord, in NAFTA, in the Québec referendum, in negotiating with the First Nations, in the debate over the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, and will undoubtedly continue to face us in the future. They remind us that citizenship in Canada, perhaps more than in most countries, is a matter of continuing debate. It is not a matter of learning the answers to the age-old questions, as when one learns the catechism, but of being able and willing to join in a continuing conversation. Political theorists have long said that dialogue and debate lie at the heart of democracy, and nowhere is this more true than in Canada.

As with identity, so with the other elements of citizenship education. All raise difficult and continuing questions which constitute the very essence of citizenship in Canada. We all agree, for example, that citizenship confers certain rights, but just what are they and what should they be? To some extent, they are enshrined in the 1982 *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, but the Charter does not cover everything and is in any case open to challenge. Is health care a right, for example? Is a job? What is the balance between individual and group rights? And even when we agree about rights in the abstract, we can easily disagree on their application in concrete cases, as in the controversies over abortion, assisted suicide, censorship, discrimination, and so on. As in the case of identity, the rights of citizenship are not once-for-all givens, but matters of continuing debate.

The same is true of all the elements of citizenship education listed above, most obviously in the cases of social values and of the duties and obligations of citizenship, but this dynamic fluidity of citizenship is what makes education so important. The quality of life in Canada, and even its political integrity, depends in large part on the ability of its people to act as citizens, to take an intelligent and informed interest in public affairs, to participate in those affairs, to accept disagreement and difference, to understand that there are often no easy or agreed answers to common problems. This means that citizens must possess what philosophers have identified as the democratic virtues. Carol Gould, for example, has identified these as reciprocity in dealing with other people, openness to diverse viewpoints, respect for human rights, mutuality, flexibility, open-mindedness, concern for community, ability to work with others, capacity for rational activity and initiative. The Manitoba Department of Education put it very simply in 1948, describing the responsible citizenship as openness to other viewpoints, respect for the rights of others, realizing that every right brings a corresponding responsibility, understanding the democratic process, respect for the law, and participation in public affairs.[5]

We are not born with these qualities. We have to learn them. And school is where much of our learning should take place, especially in an age where powerful voices convey a contrary message. For the most part, the media do not preach a message of citizenship. Instead, they teach our children far more about the United States than about Canada, and generally emphasize personal gratification, withdrawal from public life, political apathy and cynicism. Citizenship requires the schools to teach knowledge as well as skills. Despite the urging of futurists, knowledge is not obsolete. Citizens need it in their heads, not in their computers. They also need the skills to analyze and use it. And, as is obvious from all that has been said so far, citizenship is also a matter of values.

Citizenship education is far more than a course in civics or a training in good behaviour. It draws on all the subjects in the curriculum, and on extracurricular activities. It is shaped by the way teachers teach and interact with students and by the overall atmosphere of the school. A good general education is in many ways the best preparation for citizenship, provided that teachers show students how what they are learning applies in the world as it exists. The 19th-century poet and literary critic, and school inspector, Matthew Arnold, said that education should introduce us to the best that has been known and written, not so much because this was good for its own sake, but because this kind of knowledge and understanding helps us see our contemporary affairs, what Arnold called "our stock of received", in perspective and gives us some standards against which to judge them.[6]

To argue that we should make citizenship the centrepiece of education policy is not to call for the training of heel-clicking, flag-waving patriots. In 1937 the Principal of McGill University made this statement: "The path to a better community lies before us, open but not clear. As I see it, the task of education is to give us the wisdom to see that path, hope to believe in our goal, and will to pursue it.[7] A few years earlier, in 1932, the Principal of the Manitoba Normal School

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had said much the same thing: "The only hope for curing the ills of the world is that young people may picture a better one and strive to realize it. To frame this picture and to cultivate this ambition is the greatest duty of the school."[8]

It is a vision of education and of the demands of citizenship that is far more attractive and far more worthwhile than our present concern for training workers who will adapt to the imperatives of the global economy.

1 *Building a Solid Foundation for our Future: A Strategy Plan*, 1991-96 (Winnipeg: Manitoba Education and Training, 1991), p. 1. For the remarks of the Minister of Education in 1916, see R. Henley & J. Pampallis, "The Campaign for Compulsory Education in Manitoba," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 7 [1], 1982, pp. 59-83.

2 J. H. Putman, & G. M. Weir, *Survey of the School System* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1925), p. 38. The Radwanski quotations can be found in G. Radwanski, *Study of the Relevance of Education and the Issue of Dropouts* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 1987), p. 11.

3 For the development of citizenship education in Canada, see K. Osborne, "Education is the Best National Insurance: Citizenship Education in Canadian Schools, Past and Present," *Canadian and International Education*, 25 [2], 1996, pp. 31-58. For two expressions of concern that multiculturalism has gone too far, see N. Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (Toronto: Penguin, 1994); and J. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998). For a defence of multiculturalism in the context of citizenship, see W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); and C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

4 John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Penguin, 1998). For the idea of pan-Canadian understanding, see P. Gallagher & A.B. Hodgetts, *Teaching Canada for the 80s* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1978) For Symons, see T. H. B. Symons, *The Symons Report* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978).

5 C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 283-299. The 1948 statement is taken from The Manitoba School Journal, X [2], October, 1948, p. 4. Other formulations of democratic values can be found in W. Galston, *Liberal Virtues: Diversity and Values in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 220-227; and D.T. Sehr, *Education for Public Democracy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 78ff.

6 On Matthew Arnold's educational ideas, see G. Sutherland, *Arnold on Education* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). Also M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy,* edited by Samuel Lipman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

7 A. E. Morgan, "Education and Democracy," *The Western School Journal*, XXXII [6], June, 1937, p.168.

8 W. A. MacIntyre, "The School Preparing for Life," *The Western School Journal*, XXXVII [2], 1932, February, 1932, p. 45.

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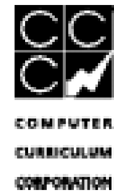

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THE DRUNKEN VALLEY

By Peter Quinlan
Brantford Collegiate Institute

The obese man sits in his broken lawn chair,
Deep in a valley.
A beer held so tightly that the bottle,
Seemed to be holding the hand
He remembers a love that once was held there.
As tightly as that bottle.
He looks at the drink and tastes,
The bitter tears that had ran down his cheek,
Wondering why he ever chose the bottle over her.
He drinks.

Winter comes.
Freezing the beer to his hand.
The drink is necessary in the cold months,
It keeps him warm.
But he will let it go someday.
He promises himself
He drinks.

Spring arrives to push away the snow.
The man watches the flowers grow up on the hill.
The blossoms entwine around each other,
Lovingly supporting one another.
Down in the valley where the tired man sits,
The weeds below his chair only fight each other.
They bite and claw hatedly in competition.
He looks at his bottle with hated love.
But he will let it go someday,
He promises himself.
He drinks.

Summer comes and the flowers go,
The weeds stay wrapping themselves around the broken chair.
The sweaty man clings to the bottle.
It keeps him cool in the hot months.
He will let it go one day,
He promises himself.
He drinks.

Autumn comes and the trees on the hill
produce rainbows of beautiful color.
The trees make sure to catch the pure sunlight.
Before it reaches the valley,
So that it won't be tainted by the man's skin.
Down in the valley,
The bottle drops from his hand,
And shatters on the weeds below.
The lifeless man's head slumps down.
In his broken chair.
In death, he lets it go.