

POLITICAL EDUCATION and CITIZENSHIP

Teaching for Civic Engagement

KEN OSBORNE

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It is no secret that schools do what they can to teach citizenship. It is perhaps not so well known, except to specialists, that citizenship is a much contested concept once one gets beyond its basic definition as membership in a recognized sovereign state. Historical struggles and political debates over its meaning have made citizenship an arena where competing interests and philosophies contend, to the point that one might reasonably claim that the essence of citizenship is to be found in the continuing debate over what it means to be a citizen.

Schools, however, have largely avoided this debate by depoliticizing the concept of citizenship. They have equated the good citizen with the good person, the man or woman who helps others, respects other people's rights, obeys the law, is suitably patriotic, and the like. These are certainly valuable qualities. Society depends on them for its successful functioning. But citizenship demands more. It requires a willingness and an ability to play an active and morally principled part in the public life of one's society, at the very least by casting an informed vote in elections and, ideally, by being engaged with and in public affairs. One can be a good person without being a good citizen, but, at least in any society that claims to be genuinely democratic, one cannot be the reverse. A democratic society demands of its members that they be both good persons and good citizens.

Schools have largely succeeded in educating children to be good people but have been much less successful in turning them into good citizens. Most Canadians obey the law and practise tolerance, self-restraint, respect for others, honesty, and other such basic values upon which social health depend. These values exist because they are taught and learned in school – obviously not in schools alone, but to the extent that Canada is a society that works, schools deserve some of the credit. There is no need to exhort schools to teach empathy, tolerance, respect for others, reliance on rational argument, and other such qualities. The evidence suggests that they know how to do this and do it effectively.

As important as these qualities are, citizenship demands more. They represent a depoliticized view of citizenship that equates being a good person with

being a good citizen. They provide a necessary foundation for the exercise of citizenship. But they do not address the dimension of citizenship that embraces an informed and principled engagement in and with the public affairs of one's society. Here, the evidence suggests that we are not all that successful.

The 2004 federal election drew renewed attention, not only to the general decline in voter turn-out (from around 80% in the early 1960s to around 60% today), but particularly to the much more marked abstention of young adults from the political process. According to the best evidence we have, only a quarter or so of young adults (i.e. 18-25 year olds) have bothered to vote in recent elections. Equally disturbing, these young adults are less knowledgeable about and less interested in politics, and less likely to have been involved in any kind of political activity (demonstrations, protests, lobbying, and so on), than either older Canadians or the young adults of earlier years. In addition, political awareness and engagement vary with social class, with middle class students being much more likely to be politically active than their working class counterparts. As a result, the very people who have the most to gain from participating in the political process are the least likely to do so, a state of affairs that schools have been unable to correct and – given the close correlation that exists between schooling and social class – have some role in perpetuating.

Moreover, although some of today's apolitical young adults will probably become more politically engaged as they grow older, the evidence suggests that we are looking at a “generational” not a “life-style” phenomenon. In other words, political disengagement is not something that is shaken off with age; rather, it persists over time and, according to some observers, is all too likely to be reinforced by the general decline in social capital and the weakening of civil society.

Some observers see the schools as both the cause of and the solution to this problem. According to the Dominion Institute, for example, it is the result of the schools' failure to teach civics and history. A more persuasive view suggests that it is not the schools' failure to teach civics – for in fact most do in some form or other –



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EN BREF Les écoles confondent souvent les notions de « bon citoyen » et de « bonne personne ». Une bonne personne aide son prochain, respecte les droits d'autrui, obéit aux lois et manifeste des sentiments patriotiques. Or, pour être un bon citoyen, il faut plus que cela. Nos écoles font de l'excellent travail quand il s'agit d'apprendre aux élèves à être de bonnes personnes, mais elles sont moins douées pour leur inculquer l'importance d'une participation active à la vie publique et au processus politique. Par conséquent, ce sont justement les personnes qui auraient le plus à gagner d'une telle participation qui participent le moins. C'est là, une situation que les écoles semblent incapables de corriger et qu'elles même aident à perpétuer, si l'on tient compte de l'étroite corrélation qui existe entre le niveau d'éducation et la classe sociale.

but their failure to teach it in the right way. Two pieces of evidence suggest that this might be so. First, university graduates are much more likely than high school graduates to be politically knowledgeable and involved, suggesting that university has an impact on students that schools fail to achieve. Second, most high school graduates are no more politically knowledgeable or engaged than high school dropouts.

It could be that civics (or social studies or whatever one wishes to call it), as traditionally taught, fails to grip students. For most students voting is a future-focussed activity. There is little in conventional civics that they can apply to their own lives, except for an occasional problem that affects youth directly, such as street crime or juvenile justice. They agree that civics helps them understand current affairs, but they do not see these affairs as having much personal relevance. Moreover, even when students describe civics as interesting, they do not find it especially useful; they see no pay-off in it, whether in terms of getting a job or pursuing further education.

Provincial ministries of education are responding to this state of affairs by paying renewed attention to citizenship education. Cast aside in the 1980s and 1990s as policy-makers sought to link schooling more directly to the labour market, citizenship has made something of a curricular comeback, although it is largely ghettoized within history and social studies, leaving teachers of other subjects to concentrate on more “academic” priorities. However, it seems unlikely that new courses in civics or politics, or new thematic emphases in history or social studies, will achieve what is expected of them. The more fundamental problem is that by high school, students come to see schooling for what society has made it: a custodial credentialing machine in which education becomes little more than the accumulation of credits. Some years back, I asked a Grade 10 class

what they hoped to get out of Grade 10. They told me I had answered my own question: they wanted to get out of Grade 10. Why? So they could enter Grade 11, then get out of it into Grade 12, and so on and so on. In these circumstances, courses in civics and citizenship are likely to become little more than additional hurdles to be jumped on the way to graduation.

There are five things that we can do to make citizenship education more effective. None carries any guarantee, for the fundamental problems lie not in what schools do or do not do, but in the wider society outside the schools. But even if they do not improve the quality of citizenship, they might make citizenship education more genuinely educational.

First, we should make sure that all students receive a truly liberal education that introduces them to the findings and ways of thinking of the arts, sciences, and humanities. This will not only benefit them intellectually; it will, if appropriately taught, introduce them to the long story of humanity's attempts to adapt to, shape, and live within its various environments. Young Canadians largely accept as givens the things that people of my generation regard as hard-won achievements that should never be taken for granted. A liberal education that introduces students to the story of the human drama over time just might give them that sense of connectedness that situates the present in the context of past and future and thereby persuades them to play their part in its continuance.

Second, schools should ensure that citizenship – especially in its political dimension – is prominently inscribed in their mission statements and statements of goals. My hunch is that many teachers do not see themselves as teachers of citizenship in its politicized sense, seeing this as something which is the responsibility of the history or social studies department. But students learn citizenship in many differ-

ent ways. The so-called hidden curriculum delivers powerful citizenship messages to students, as do teachers of all subjects, often without realizing it. Schools often adopt particular policies – about lateness, or smoking, or report cards – to address a particular problem without thinking of what such policies say about citizenship. As a result, the day-to-day conduct of a school, especially as seen through students' eyes, can easily deliver a citizenship message that is very different from the one the school professes. Schools must, therefore, do more than ensure that citizenship is a publicly stated goal; they must ensure that their policies and classroom practices reflect that goal.

Third, teacher education has a role to play in this regard. The growing body of citizenship theory and research remains a closed book to most teachers, despite its powerful implications for education. There is a strong case for including the study of citizenship in all teacher education programmes,

both pre-service and in-service, regardless of level or subject specialty.

Fourth, we should think of specific instruction in civics as political education: an introduction to and engagement with the real world of politics. Politics has to become something that students actually do and not just study, something where they can take considered and principled action that has consequences in the world beyond the classroom. Across Canada there are students who, as part of their class-work, are engaged in environmental campaigns, social justice and human rights issues, and other forms of political activity. We need to extend this approach to the greatest extent possible. Most community service programmes go some way in this direction but they do not go far enough. They too easily resemble old-style charity work, in which students seek to ameliorate social problems without asking why these problems exist in the first place or engaging in political action to correct them.

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Fifth, in all subjects we should portray human beings, past and present, as actively engaged in shaping their environment. We too easily teach our subjects in terms of impersonal causes and results, laws and concepts, and blocks of factual knowledge, reducing literature to the analysis of theme, character, and plot; history to a summary of causes and results, perhaps enlivened by an anecdote or two; science to the description of scientific laws and the exercise of scientific method; mathematics to the application of algorithms; and so on. In approaching our subjects in this way, we lose sight of the reality that they are in essence records of human agency, depictions of human beings struggling to understand, explain, and shape the environment that surrounds them.

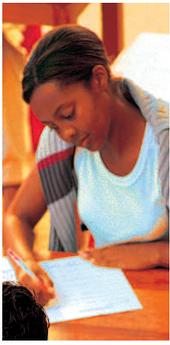
I have neither the skill nor the expertise to figure out how this might be done across the curriculum, but in my own subject, history, it means seeing the past not simply as prologue to the present, or a treasure trove of case studies, but rather as the story of men and women confronting the problems that faced them without ever knowing what the consequences of their actions would be. We must help students see the past through the eyes of the people who lived it. We should, so to speak, teach history looking forward into an unknown future, not backwards with the hindsight of the present. Above all, we should teach it as a story of human agency, of people's attempts to understand and shape their world. If we approach the human story in this way – and all subjects can be taught in this way – then our students might come to see themselves as heirs to a tradition of human striving that connects past, present, and future. It might even be that this will translate itself into a sense of political efficacy and engagement that will make democratic citizenship a reality. ★

Some Suggestions for Reading

For an up to date summary of Canadian citizenship research, see Elizabeth Gidengil, André Blais, Neil Nevitte & Richard Nadeau, *Citizens* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004).

The philosophical debates about citizenship can be sampled in Ronald Beiner (ed.), *Theorizing Citizenship*





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(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); and Gershon Shafir (ed.), *The Citizenship Debates: A Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

Of particular relevance to Canada is Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

A good historical survey is Derek Heater, *Citizenship: The Civic Ideal in World History, Politics and Education* (London: Longman, revised edition Manchester University Press, 2004).

For citizenship education, see Derek B. Heater, *A History of Education for Citizenship* (London: Falmer Routledge, 2003); Ken Osborne, *Teaching for Democratic Citizenship* (Toronto: Our Schools Ourselves: Lorimer, 1991); Walter C. Parker, *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003); Derek Heater & Judith A. Gillespie (eds.), *Political Education in Flux* (London: Sage, 1981).

For two empirical Canadian studies, see Jean-Pierre Charland, *Les élèves, l'histoire et la citoyenneté : Enquête auprès d'élèves des régions de Montréal et de Toronto* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2003), and Robert Martineau, *L'histoire à l'école, matière à penser...* (Montréal: L'Harmattan, 1999).

For the citizenship potential of liberal education, see Robert Orrill (ed.), *Education and Democracy: Re-imagining Liberal Learning in America* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1997); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Alan Ryan, *Liberal Anxieties and Liberal Education* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998); Richard E. Proctor, *Defining the Humanities: How Rediscovering a Tradition Can Improve our Schools* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

For a more polemical, but in my view less persuasive, argument, see Peter C. Emberley & Waller R. Newell, *Bankrupt Education: The Decline of Liberal Education in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

KEN OSBORNE is an emeritus professor of education at the University of Manitoba. He taught history in Winnipeg high schools from 1961 into the 1970s when he joined the staff of the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. He has written extensively on the teaching of history and on citizenship education.

Italian Campaign Victory in Europe D-Day Liberation of Holland



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