Reimagining Schools to Be Places of Deeper Learning

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To achieve cohesion within a system, argues Sinek (2009), among others, there must be a purpose beyond addressing the objectives of our courses. With never-ending calls for education reform from various stakeholders and diminishing faith in the system as a whole, it is time for educators to examine, or re-examine, their moral purpose. What is our *why*? Do our practices align with our purpose? Are we helping our students to grow, and in which areas? While we might wish it safe to assume that, within our schools, all students are given opportunities to succeed at learning and to develop the necessary skills to be successful outside of school, is this reality? Do our schools prepare students to take responsibility for their own learning and to take that learning beyond the classroom out into the world? With calls for school reform from stakeholders in education, it is time to consider the various changes necessary within the current system to support our true educational purpose, or if the system as a whole needs to be dismantled and reconceptualized.

The Development of Compulsory Education and Its Role in the Culture of Compliance

While the compulsory education system has (arguably) shifted from its original purpose and model, or the First Way, to its current purpose and model—the Third Way (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009), many of the changes made have been surface changes and not foundational ones. Examining the history of compulsory education, therefore, offers insight into our current "Third Way" system as it is today, and assists us in moving forward to a potential "Fourth Way" of inspired education.

Compulsory school began as a place to occupy and monitor children during the day, when parents were at work, in a time when mass migration to cities required a mechanism to instill order. Migrants, who made up a large, unskilled workforce at the time, needed to be sorted and managed. Schools were—and arguably continue to be, as evidenced by recent suspension of classes during the global pandemic—shaped by the ideas of scientific management (Rincón-Gallardo 2019). Scientific management, as a philosophy, stated that "the best way to organize human activity was to break down complex work into small, repetitive and routine tasks, with external incentives to ensure adequate execution of the work. Mass compulsory schooling was an invention that responded to the needs of the industrial revolution …" (Rincón-Gallardo 2019, 1). Consequently, the design of compulsory education became based on scientific management principles, including breaking down activities into simple, repetitive tasks that don't require a high level of skill and using externally imposed punishments and rewards to build compliance.

Schools have traditionally been well organized to address three social roles: custody, control and distribution of merit. "School work has become … a series of tasks to get done for compliance, good grades, and certificates" (Rincón-Gallardo 2019, 2). Scientific management served, and continues to serve,

as the foundation upon which the education system was built. The ideas of sorting students into grade groups based on their age, breaking the school day into discrete blocks of time dedicated to the study of a single, discrete subject and rewarding students who demonstrated appropriate behaviour with grades remain key defining features of schools passed down from the theorists of scientific management (Rincón-Gallardo 2019). This system served to manage large numbers of students, and continues to serve this purpose. During the development of compulsory education, the purpose of school was not to develop critical thinkers, but to produce compliant workers for the assembly line jobs of the time.

In *Dumbing Us Down*, Gatto (2017) explains that, inherently, schools teach or reinforce confusion, indifference, deference to authority, emotional and intellectual dependency, and acceptance of constant surveillance and criticism.[1] While these features may not intentionally be taught, they are embedded in the culture of the education system and deeply entrenched in "how we do things." Without upsetting the system in a significant way, these ideals will continue to be embedded in what we teach and how we teach children, despite these things being in opposition to our values and the true intended purpose of education.

The persistent culture of compliance and inherent hierarchy that permeates the education system is deeply entrenched, and has proven difficult, even impossible, to change. This conservative hierarchical system, with adults at the top and students at the bottom, reinforces systems and traditional rules that have been in place since the beginning of compulsory school. Shifting this system to one with a focus on democratic values seems a distant goal. "Our culture has already dictated that school entails a timeless, existential battle between the tasks and rules adults impose on the one hand, and students' efforts to preserve their own souls without getting thrown out, on the other hand" (Westheimer 2015, 6).

This system of scientific management, as exemplified by diplomas, certificates and grades, tells us nothing about whether graduates are prepared for the world, to be contributing citizens in democracies and to change the world for the better. Yet, in education, we perpetuate this system of credentialization when we focus our energies on standardized assessments. "Current school reform policies and many classroom practices too often reduce teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to make principled stands that have long been associated with democracy" (Westheimer 2015, 18). Increased standardization of curriculum and teaching practices, and movement toward increasing accountability mean that teachers feel they have lost their professional judgment, freedom and ability to be creative (things we should value in our democratic societies), and that students are not receiving as many or as rich learning opportunities (Ritchhart 2015). "When education reforms turn away from an emphasis on supporting positive conditions of practice and move toward technocratic strategies for 'compliance,' the profession suffers and so do the students" (Westheimer 2015, 21). Education has the potential to change the world in positive ways, through social movements—but not if it continues to be done for compliance, good grades and certificates (Rincón-Gallardo 2019). "We need to scream and argue about this school thing until it is fixed or broken beyond repair, one or the other" (Gatto 2019, 26). With all the evidence that schools and the education system are rigged to fail our children, there are still surprisingly few arguments for whole-system reforms.

Indictments of the Education System and Its Inability to Change

Many Canadian educational theorists, of whom Michael Fullan might be considered the leader, focus significant attention on changing and improving the education system. These attempts at making change take several shapes, including examinations of effective teaching and teacher training programs, for example, but often constitute merely tinkering within the system. As a theorist focused on creating lasting change within the education system, Fullan is not alone in his belief that, in order to make changes to education, the system as a whole needs to fundamentally change. "… (W)e have an educational system which is fundamentally conservative. The way that teachers are trained, the way that schools are organized, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that education is treated by political decision-makers results in a system that is more likely to retain the status quo than to change" (Fullan 1993, 3).

Proponents of education reform talk of improving teaching and learning by focusing on teacher qualifications and training, or teacher effectiveness (Sahlberg 2015). They believe that by focusing on teacher effectiveness, the effects of increasing class size, lower funding and other pressures on the

education system can be mitigated. Sahlberg's research indicates that this belief is based on the fallacy that mitigation can be accomplished through three apparent solutions: recruitment policies—but without corresponding respect for and trust in teachers; improved individual teacher efficacy—but without a supportive culture and time for collective practice; and a singular focus on the impact of teachers on learning—but without a focus on the many other factors that influence learning. Reform that focuses only on these three purported solutions without providing the corresponding supports will not lead to lasting change, but will lead to increased pressures on individual teachers.

While improving teacher efficacy can lead to improved learning, the deeply embedded issues within the education system are not centred on individual teacher efficacy. "The problem is not lack of knowledge about teaching and learning. It is the distracters in the system that divert teachers from the core purposes and proven practices that support and sustain their capacity to teach well. Mandated targets, endless testing, scripted programs, a tsunami of spreadsheets, profusions of standards, banks of rubrics, and overwhelming emphases on basics—these are the things that drive teachers to distraction" (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, 87). Many of the core components of the education system, as well as the systems of accountability imposed on teachers by proponents of reform, stand in the way of student learning and are not effective to create lasting change. Increased standardization of curriculum and teaching practices, as well as increasing pressures on teachers, are supporting technocratic, neoliberal practices in schools.

Many theorists, including Hargreaves and Shirley for example, have joined Fullan in his critique of the purpose of the system, as well as its ability to change and improve. "It's time for a change that is disruptive, not incremental. It's time to bring the magic and wonder back into teaching. It's time to recover the missionary spirit and deep moral purpose of engaging and inspiring all our students" (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, 45). Hargreaves and Shirley paint a more hopeful picture than many other education critics, one that credits the education system with having once had a missionary spirit and deep moral purpose. Gatto (2017), on the other hand, states that "…we need to realize that the school institution 'schools' very well, though it does not 'educate'—that's inherent in the design of the thing. It's not the fault of bad teachers or too little money spent. It's just impossible for education and schooling ever to be the same thing" (p 21). Rincón-Gallardo (2019), a contemporary of Fullan's, claims, "Not only were schools not designed to foster learning; they can get in the way of learning. They do this, sometimes unintentionally, other times deliberately, through prioritizing compliance, compartmentalizing knowledge, creating fear of failure, and concentrating control in the hands of adults" (p 5). Littky (2004) argues that societies have shifted from the industrial to the information age, but schools have not kept up. "Today, as yesterday, a traditional school is a building that isolates large groups of young people from adults and the resources and experiences of the real world, then expects them to emerge at age 18 knowing how to be adult, how to work, and how to live in the real world … *The world is changing – schools are not*" (Littky 2004, 31–32, emphasis in original).

Society has unrealistic views of what schools can do, so we cannot add more to the plates of teachers, administrators and school systems. We need to redefine our job and reconceptualize how we will do it to accomplish our goals, which need to be clearly defined (Rincón-Gallardo 2019). Clearly defining the role and purpose of education, and aligning our practice with our purpose, rests at the core of the change movement—having a moral purpose and practices that align with it is a good first step.

The Education System Is Not a Learning Community

Traditional schools believe their structure is conducive to creating an interdependent community. Recent theories, however, have reconceptualized the notion of schools as communities, suggesting that they are a long way from ideal. "It is a fact generally ignored when considering the communal nature of institutional families like schools, large corporations, colleges … that they are not real communities at all, but are networks" (Gatto 2017, 47). Real communities are places were people share their humanity, for good and bad. Communities promote engagement and genuine participation. The interactions of the various community members are rich and complex, and are not competitive in nature, but cooperative. In networks, though, people are only allowed to associate within a narrowly confined structure that contributes to the network. All interactions are narrowly focused, and competition is the norm. Gatto (2017) argues that "Networks like schools are not communities, just as school training is not education. By pre-empting fifty

percent of the total time of the young, by locking young people up with other young people exactly their own age, by ringing bells to start and stop work, by asking people to think about the same thing at the same time in the same way, by grading people the way we grade vegetables—and in a dozen other vile and stupid ways—network schools steal the vitality of community and replace it with an ugly mechanism" (p 49). By espousing network principles of competition, grading and compliance, schools position themselves as networks without any of the vital characteristics of learning communities.

A shift toward making schools into true learning communities should focus on building social capital in all members. Social capital can be grown in communities with shared common vision and goals, as well as embedded norms of civic engagement and reciprocity (Putnam 2001). Building social capital, along with social and civic engagement, leads to members within the community trusting each other ("not perfect and unconditional trust, of course, which is why lawyers and courts [are] needed [Putnam 2001, 29]). Successful communities are those who work together for the common good; rather than focusing on individual rights, they are focused on creating reciprocal relationships built on trust. The values upon which the community is built benefit all members, even those who are traditionally marginalized. "Our schools are the social embryos of humanity—those institutions that we establish to promote our highest collective values. They should be the embodiment of norms of reciprocity, active trust, and democratic deliberation" (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, 99).

Changing the Education System Through Social Movements

Recently, researchers and proponents of educational change have been interested in examining, and changing, the relationship between educator and learner in the learning process. Currently, the relationship between educator and learner is hierarchical: the educator exercises power over the learner. "There is a clear vertical division between who determines what is to be done and who is expected to follow the instructions of the one above. Looked at from this perspective, conventional schooling is not only a disservice to learning, but also to democracy" (Rincón-Gallardo 2019, 8). Liberated learning promotes horizontal learning relationships between teachers and learners based on open dialogue—characteristic of relationships in communities rather than those found in networks, which would describe traditional teacher/student relationships. Our education systems can offer deeper learning, joy in learning, and the skills and strategies to help our students make the world a better place—if we can navigate past the restrictions placed by scientific management principles (Rincón-Gallardo 2019).

"It is time that we squarely face the fact that institutional schoolteaching is destructive to children … The method is deeply and profoundly anti-educational. No tinkering will fix it" (Gatto 2017, 15–16). The solution is to provide choice in education that suits children, give them voice and agency over their learning, and destructure schools. Gatto argues that it is the structure of the school system, its dependence on scientific management principles, and the structure of power upon which teacher and student relationships are based, that are anti-educational and do nothing to support democratic principles.

Gatto is not alone in his conclusion that students have little to no voice in their education (Sears, Peck and Herriot 2014; Raby 2012; Littky 2004). Littky also contends that students have "zero say in their school: no voice in how it's run, the rules, the curriculum, the way they're treated, where the money is spent, and how they spend their time or who they spend it with" (Littky 2004, 51). Littky and also Sears, Peck and Herriot (2014) argue that it's no wonder that students do not engage in our democratic process when they leave school, as they have no say in anything that directly affects them during their school days. Students across Canada feel disempowered, and thus disengaged from school. This is also the case in Alberta—"…students in Alberta feel a pervasive sense of voicelessness in terms of society generally and their schools in particular. In some ways they are … cynical about student government and schools as democratic communities" (Sears, Peck and Herriot 2014, 7). Students need real control over their lives, and for that, they need to be engaged in a true democratic process within a democratic environment.

In a Liberal Democracy, What Do Students Really Need to Learn in School?

Schools are full of implicit lessons about what it means to be a good citizen. The criticism is that these

implicit lessons fit better with an authoritarian mindset than a democratic one. Students spend lots of time in schools learning *citizenship skills*—how to get along with others, fulfill our responsibilities and follow rules, but little to no time participating in genuine democratic practices. Teachers do not spend much time talking or teaching about, never mind engaging students in, independent thinking, decision making, improving their communities, cooperation, critical thinking, asking challenging questions, challenging widespread cultural assumptions and traditions, and thoughtful dialogue when we have competing ideas—the values of democratic participation (Westheimer 2015). "Even without specific classes in citizenship, government, character, or life skills, how the classroom is organized, the architecture of the school, the daily schedule, as well as the procedures and rules all have embedded lessons about how one should best behave in order to be a good community member, classmate, student, and so on" (Westheimer 2015, 37). These lessons centre on narrow definitions of what modern citizenship means, and fail to promote democratic dispositions among students, never mind educating students to be participatory citizens in the democratic process or citizens who are social justice oriented.

Westheimer (2015) describes three types of democratic citizens: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen and the social justice-oriented citizen. The current structure of schools can promote the development of socially responsible citizens (that is, those citizens who act responsibly in the community, pay their taxes, obey laws and generally have good character). School rules and structures do support the teaching of social responsibility. Where schools lack is in teaching students to be participatory citizens and, particularly, social justice-oriented citizens. With very few exceptions, schools fail to allow students to participate in any form of a democratic system within their walls (Raby 2012; Sears, Peck and Herriot 2014), thereby missing the opportunity to teach democratic ideals in a genuine way. Schools virtually across the board fail to engage students in democracy and the development of school rules and expectations; rather, these are imposed on them (Raby 2012). While students may learn how democracy works, they are not often, if at all, afforded opportunities to practise it, actively participate, or effect changes within the school system.

Even the most well-intentioned and progressive schools who teach democracy through citizenship classes and programs fail to instill a social justice orientation in students. Students who are socially justice oriented are able to analyze social, political and/or economic problems, isolate the root causes of the problem and create social movements to effect systemic changes in the areas of injustice (Westheimer 2015). They are politically literate. Teaching this kind of citizen requires giving students voice over their lives and communities and teaching them about ways to effect systemic change at the root causes of the social justice issues under examination. As teachers working in a democratic society, we tend to assume that our education system is set up to support the democratic process by teaching our children to be participants in the democratic system. Democratic participation of citizens requires actively challenging the status quo by being literate and critical, and thus being able to enact change when necessary. "Teaching and learning in democratic societies has specific requirements. Chief among these are that students know how to think critically, ask questions, evaluate policy, and work with others toward change that moves democracy forward" (Westheimer 2015, 99). While school programs have attempted to promote democratic citizenship, they usually address ideas like volunteerism, obedience or listening to authority, and being nice to one's neighbours, and don't promote participation in debate, critical thinking and analysis, social justice, and responsibility (Westheimer 2015). Our education system severely lacks opportunities for students to participate genuinely in their learning in democratic ways.

Citizenship education as taught in many schools may lead to indoctrination of our students. Students are taught to ignore the validity of evidence, view issues in black and white and oversimplify problems, rather than to be critical of information and sources. Students are taught to believe the media and put down those with differing views, rather than approach problems with a critical open mind (Carr and Thesee 2008). Students fail to see injustices done to others, understand the root causes of these injustices and recognize how they can effect change. Schools in democracies need to teach all students to be politically literate, as "(c)ritical, political literacy can become an indispensable tool for citizens" (Carr and Thesee 2008, 173).

Teachers need to challenge their own assumptions that, within the traditional school system, they help students learn to be more critical, challenge the status quo, analyze problems and engage democratically in society. "Teaching and learning—in both public and independent schools—do not always conform to

democratic goals and ideas" (Westheimer 2015, 13). In fact, intentionally or otherwise, many of the teachings that occur do not support the development of democratic principles and processes within schools and among students. "If being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social assumptions, then that foundation of citizenship is at odds with recent trends in education policy" (Westheimer 2015, 13).

Creating Cultures of Thinking and Democratic Participation in Alberta Schools

Given the current curriculum revisions we are experiencing in Alberta, we find ourselves at a critical juncture in society and education. With social movements like Black Lives Matter protesting the treatment of minorities in both the United States and Canada, and colliding forces in education reform pushing for greater accountability and standardization, teachers need to consider how best to teach students to participate in society and become justice-oriented citizens (Westheimer 2015). "…(T)here are many deficiencies in the new and enhanced interpretation of the role of education in the twenty-first century, and it is increasingly questionable how the liberal hegemony (and schools which situate themselves within the liberal hegemony) will provide for social justice and democracy during and after the formal education experience" (Carr and Thesee 2008, 179). Many may consider the Black Lives Matter movement as proof that students benefit from citizenship education and are able to be participatory citizens. Yet, we need to question whether advocates of the Black Lives Matter movement can critically assess social, political and economic structures that lead to inequality, racism and oppression; explore strategies for change that address the root cause of racism and inequality; effect systemic change through social movements; and seek out and address injustices (Westheimer 2015). These criteria define a social justice-oriented citizen—one who can effect permanent systemic change.

While teachers in Alberta agree to a substantial degree that the goal of developing active and engaged citizens of a democratic society is important (93 per cent strongly agreed or agreed in a 2016 survey of social studies teachers conducted by the Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA]), social studies classrooms continue to be teacher focused, with instruction targeting the multiple outcomes of the provincial curriculum rather than the dispositions required of democratic citizens. Many Alberta teachers continue to struggle to integrate critical thinking, inquiry and deeper learning into their daily practice (ATA 2016). While this is certainly not a problem unique to social studies teachers, the subject matter of the social studies curriculum lends itself well to the instruction of critical thinking, inquiry and deeper learning, as well as democratic citizenship ideals within a culture of thinking. "Social studies curricula across the country stress the education of critical and engaged citizens with the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to positively shape their communities, provinces, nations and, indeed, the world … the role of social studies in Alberta is to develop 'the key values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes necessary for students to become active and responsible citizens, engaged in the democratic process and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world'" (Sears, Peck and Herriot 2014, 6). Yet, students in Alberta continue to feel voiceless and without agency over their learning.

While social studies teachers felt that they had a "great deal of freedom" (ATA 2016, 23), their opinions were divided on the role that acquisition of knowledge, versus higher-order thinking, plays in their classrooms. A majority of teachers felt that there was generally not enough time to explore interesting topics in depth, as there were too many discrete outcomes in the curriculum to cover. While teachers felt confident in how to deal with controversial issues in current events, many felt there was insufficient time to delve into these topics to engage in deeper, more meaningful learning through discussion. Instead, some felt that there was an over-emphasis on testing (ATA 2016).

Dialectic Forces Tied to Our System, and Liberation

Mass education is currently structured to support conformity, obedience and compliance—the characteristics of networks, not communities. Mass education supports the belief that the way it is, is the way it should be, by focusing on neoliberal values such as competition, oppression, suppression of different ideas, and dominance. A shift needs to occur toward community values like equity, justice, creativity, imagination and the belief that we can move beyond one rigid view of our purpose.

In order to truly transform schools into learning communities, we need to change the way we interact with knowledge in schools toward deep and powerful learning. Deep learning involves focusing learning on core outcomes through higher-order thinking. While most of the content that students learn in schools is taught through lower-order thinking (Ritchhart 2015), proponents of deeper learning seek to teach students through the use of rich learning experiences and build students' ability to use metacognitive skills to understand learning dispositions. All that we do in schools, including our policies and pedagogies, needs to support deeper learning. To create this change, we need teachers to change the system from within by creating social movements to radically redefine our schools and systems.

Paired with a focus on deeper, more meaningful learning is a focus on learning rather than on tasks. Rather than focusing on the completion of often isolated, disconnected tasks, teachers and students focus first on the intended learning. Learning occurs as a community, through engaging conversations and negotiations. When students are asked to demonstrate their learning, they are given choices of tasks, and are encouraged to demonstrate their learning in a way that is meaningful for them. Their learning is linked to students' contexts and real worlds; it is practical and applicable. Teachers learn alongside students, modelling a focus on their metacognitive strategies. Teachers listen for opportunities to deepen students' learning—what we call "teachable moments." Mistakes are not shamed, but rather welcomed as learning opportunities. Teachers provide formative feedback for learning, rather than summative judgements of performance on tasks (Ritchhart 2015).

Inherent in liberated, thinking-oriented classrooms is a distinction between teaching and learning for understanding versus for knowledge. Teaching for knowledge requires students to demonstrate low-level recall skills, while teaching for understanding "requires knowledge, but goes beyond it. Understanding depends on richly integrated and connected knowledge" (Ritchhart 2015, 47) and requires higher-level thinking. Understanding also requires the application of learning to real-world concepts and contexts. "In many classrooms, to reach this kind of understanding—that is, an understanding that stresses exploring a topic from many angles, building connections, challenging long-held assumptions, looking for applications, and producing what is for the learner a novel outcome—represents a new, different, and sometimes even radical agenda. Teaching for understanding is not school as usual" (Ritchhart 2015, 48), but it is school as it should be.

Learning can be a liberating act when we learn at our own pace with control over how we learn and make meaning of new information. This can be accomplished through dialogue between teachers and learners, and by examination of current conditions that oppress students. We can use the examination of oppressive conditions to develop policy that facilitates building horizontal relationships, which should result in a shift toward liberated learning conditions in schools and school systems (Rincón-Gallardo 2019). For example, engaging students in dialogue about the Black Lives Matter movement, wherein students share their lived experiences within a supportive community of learners with the teacher alongside, could lead to greater political literacy. Ignoring the controversy and the underlying factors that support oppression because it is a difficult topic to address in schools leads to greater disengagement and continued belief that our society is "colour blind"—a dangerous notion that supports various systems of oppression in schools and in society.

Providing opportunities for students to participate democratically in schools is antithetical to the way things are and have been done (Rincón-Gallardo 2019). By changing the culture of schools to serve our students, and changing the relationship between students and teachers so that power is more equally distributed, we can develop true learning communities where the focus shifts from merit, competition, custody and control to purposeful learning, developing mastery, and increasing autonomy and connectedness. These changes can occur effectively only through widespread cultural changes in the classroom and the whole system. The changes must then permeate the system in three arenas: the pedagogical, the social and the political (Rincón-Gallardo 2019).

Examples of schools that have embraced deeper and liberated learning exist, but are, unfortunately, isolated examples rather than the norm. Since they are isolated, they don't create permanent and lasting change on the education system, but rather only give glimpses of what liberated learning can look like. Examples like The Met School, developed by Littky, provide choice and agency to students, while focusing learning on foundational skills that help students grow into adults with skills like critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, compassion and self-regulation (Littky 2004). As these schools are labelled by the mainstream as "alternative schools," they sit on the fringe of the education

system. Until we stop viewing such school models as alternative, and embrace the idea of systemwide changes to embrace democratic ideals, little real progress will be made toward a liberated and democratic educational purpose.

Ensouling Our Schools

If we bring a spiritual (but not religious) "soul" to our instructional practices, students' perceptions of learning can shift from learning as a compulsory, teacher-focused process to one of opportunity and developing a joy of learning. Learning focused on creating equity, eliminating poverty and increasing social mobility promotes democratic ideals (Katz 2018). Katz cites Jones, Haenfler, and Johnson (2011), who describe seven foundations that should be taught in democratic schools: fairness, peace, sustainability, community, simplicity, justice and democracy. These should be the goals of education in the democratic world. "While many schools and government policies cite visions that align with these foundations, research shows there is rarely time dedicated to them, and often curricula, assessment practices, teaching methods, and school rules are not well aligned" (Katz 2018, 7). These limitations align with those identified in the Alberta Teachers' Association survey of social studies teachers conducted in 2016. There, researchers identified issues of time for inquiry, heavy outcomes-centred curricula and assessment practices (including the influence of standardized testing, lack of teacher judgment, importance of using authentic assessment methods, and taking learners and learning seriously) as barriers to ideal classrooms.

Katz (2018), a Canadian researcher and proponent of inclusive education, has developed a three-block model of universal design, based on the seven foundations of democratic schools, to be implemented in schools. She describes the benefits of using this model of universal design (which examines systems and structures, inclusive instructional practice, and social/emotional learning and well-being) as engaging students in deep, higher-order thinking and learning; helping students to take charge of their learning; and encouraging students to learn for its own sake, take risks, and become leaders and team players. Her model supports the development of a democratic classroom through practices that allow students to use their voices to create classroom expectations/rules and to critically analyze the way the classroom operates, building their understanding of community and democracy through classroom meetings; to examine issues of equity by challenging the status quo when it does not work for everyone in the classroom community; and to create necessary changes to the classroom community when the goals of justice, fairness and peace are not met within the classroom. This is accomplished by distributing leadership, focusing on collaborative practices, designing the curriculum to support diversity, creating flexible learning environments, creating student choice and autonomy, teaching and modelling self-regulation, using the inquiry and problem-based models of learning, helping students develop their self-concept, and employing a democratic classroom management model. Katz contends that by following the three-block model, schools can ensoul themselves through their practices, and thus ensoul students and liberate learning.

Schools alienate students by limiting their control over their own learning, the relevance of their learning and the engagement they experience. "Academic alienation occurs when students lack meaningful connection to their studies, when they see little relevance in the course content, and often, when they are effectively disconnected from other students …" (Katz 2018, 14). Students' ability to learn is affected by their sense of safety in the classroom, and safety is created when students are involved in their learning, are motivated by the learning and experience positive cooperative learning with their peers. A spiritual education, "challenges students to build critical understanding of their presence in the world and helps them acquire knowledge and resources to engage in social activism" (Katz 2018, 17) and leads to liberated learning in schools.

Democratic classrooms are a vital ingredient of a liberated school. In a democratic classroom, students work cooperatively as a group and with the teacher to develop the classroom rules and consequences. They talk together about what being a community member means, and students learn to actively participate in this community by using their voice. Students have some autonomy over their learning, and therefore take ownership over it. They are given choice. This helps them to be engaged in their learning. Students are active participants in the decisions that truly matter within the classroom community. Students also learn to work together to make their community a positive place to be. Democratic classrooms promote democratic principles because in these classrooms, "Students learn how to consider the needs of others, voice their own needs in appropriate ways, and find solutions that are mutually acceptable. Empowered

students are motivated to assume a degree of social responsibility, as they recognize how their contributions, either positive or negative, affect others in their community" (Katz 2018, 104).

"Schools in democracies must teach students how to ask challenging questions, entertain multiple perspectives, engage in democratic dialogue, discuss different viewpoints, challenge widely held assumptions, challenge the status quo and work for equity and social justice" (Westheimer 2015, 12–13). Using the model of ensouling our classrooms by having students practise democratic principles, rather than just learning about them through teacher instruction, and allowing students agency over their environment allows teachers to teach how to engage in the democratic practice and create change in communities; as Sears, Peck and Herriot (2014) say, we are not just here to teach about democracy, but to allow students to participate in it.

Katz (2018) calls for teachers' roles to change from "workers" to "professionals." The distinction between a worker, who is expected to conform to the role given to them by their superiors, and a professional, who has shared leadership opportunities, choice and voice, and agency over the decisions that need to be made, is an important one. The characteristics of teacher agency, voice and shared leadership are those of learning communities. If teachers are to help children develop their democratic skills and deeper learning, they must also be able to practise these skills in their workplace and model them for students. In order for changes to the education system to be permanently successful, the teachers and leaders within the system need to initiate and support the change.

Initiating Change to Create Learning Communities

While there is a lot of evidence that schools are not learning communities, but rather ones that impede and damage children's experience of learning, all hope should not be lost. Models of liberated learning encourage students to learn for the sake of learning, deepening their breadth of knowledge and their joy in learning, while practising democratic principles. While examples of truly liberated learning are few, they are powerful examples of a system that all schools can aspire to—one where students are taught to truly engage in their learning communities and to develop and practise democratic ideals. So, while we are not yet a learning community, we certainly can be with significant adjustments to the core of our system. This will be hard work, but it is not impossible.

What we currently do in education does not, unfortunately, align with our moral purpose: to give students the skills they need to flourish in school and beyond the years they spend there, to be advocates for equity and justice, to be change agents when change is called for, to be truly engaged in their community, and to flourish. As social studies teachers, we embrace the "goals of social studies as outlined in the front matter of the Alberta program: active citizenship, appreciating diversity and identity, the importance of Aboriginal perspectives and history, and a commitment to inquiry and disciplinary approaches in teaching and learning" (ATA 2016, 46)—yet we know there are incredible challenges to aligning our actual daily practice with our beliefs. We can create alignment by examining our assumptions about our system, and working for whole-system change from within.

Students can develop a sense of purpose in their learning when they have a voice in what they are learning, and have choice (Katz 2018; Littky 2004). Students can learn to be advocates who can use these skills to make meaningful changes in the democratic world. When students are shown ways to be meaningfully engaged, they can participate in their community and develop important skills that are truly of value in our democratic society. Their learning goes beyond compliance and obedience to deeper learning in which they are passionately engaged. This is the joy of learning. Schools are devoid of joy when they are focused on achievement, accountability and rigour. Schools can bring joy to learning by focusing more on intellectual engagement in deeper learning, creativity and debate. We also learn better when we are happy—that's just brain science.

Note

1. Gatto believes that schools inherently teach and reinforce the following features: 1. Confusion—concepts are taught in a predetermined order or curriculum, rather than contextually. 2. Class position or deference to authority—children learn their place and not to question it; that their only hope to change their class position is by succumbing to current economic pressures. 3. Indifference—children are taught not to care about their learning through the enforcement of bell schedules, which serve to start and stop learning randomly. 4. Emotional dependency—teachers are in control of all aspects of kids, and children are expected to follow the chain of command. 5. Intellectual dependency—children are

taught what to think and made to repeat it for rewards. 6. Provisional self-esteem—because their every action is evaluated and judged, students' self-esteem becomes dependent on adult approval. 7. Acceptance of constant surveillance—children are taught to accept being observed, managed and critiqued at all times.

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