Intentions Matter: Education and Democracy

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> Educational expansion [is] a prerequisite for liberal democracy. (Torres and Puiggrós 1995, 9)

> *Public schooling* has long been understood as holding fundamental citizenship responsibilities. (Bullough 2022, 1–2)

> Students will understand the rights and benefits of democratic citizenship and their personal and community responsibilities. (Alberta Education 2020)

Can education help us get the democracy we want? Does it serve to create good citizens? In a world that seems to lean more and more toward autocracy, should we refocus our efforts on civics education?

An assumption long held is that public education benefits democracy and is, in fact, crucial to the ongoing health of a democratic society. Evidence of this assumption exists all around us—in political speeches, in academic writing, in popular culture and in articles that point to the election of Donald Trump as a failure of civics education (Kahlenberg and Janey 2016). Horace Mann, one of the founders of public education in the United States, argued that producing good republican citizens was a key goal of education and that public education was necessary for ensuring the survival of the fledgling republic (Carleton 2009). Philosopher Bertrand Russell believed that "education was the lever of reform. It was the means for transforming civilization and for democratizing, humanizing, and bridging empathic distance between people" (Stander 1974, 447).

It's an easy narrative. After all, the socialization of students has been an aim of education for nearly all its existence. It's also easy to blame the fall of robust civics education for an increasingly autocratic world.

However, both education and society are affected by many variables, and some feel that education may not influence society much at all. For example, Biesta (2007, 765) notes, "Schools can neither create nor save democracy—they can only support societies in which action and subjectivity are real possibilities."

In an autocratic society, where people face real barriers to freedom and choice, schools may not be able to do much. However, I would argue that unless schools choose to break down the walls of control and commodification in education, we have much less chance of living in a society without those same features.

Consequently, exploring the connection between education and democracy is worthwhile. Many social studies teachers are looking around and asking ourselves if what we do matters. I know many passionate teachers who love government and civics and value our cultural and democratic institutions. But they wonder if their students value those things similarly, or if they as teachers are having any impact.

A significant correlation exists between education levels and democracy, but some places with seemingly good education systems do not support democracy at all. It is also clear that some pedagogical practices support student agency more than others. Overall, while too many variables exist to make a clear call on whether education can effectively create democratic citizens or support democracy, it is clear that education can support the reproduction of

social values. Thus, if Canadians value democracy, we must teach in ways that support democracy.

It is important to define what I mean by *democracy.*

At a high level, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project's definition of *democracy* is instructive: a country "in which political leaders are elected under comprehensive voting rights in free and fair elections, and freedoms of association and expression are guaranteed" (Herre 2022).

However, it is also important to consider the actions of democracy and what constitutes the actions of a citizen in a democracy. What does it mean to be a democratic citizen? Can you be a democratic citizen in an autocratic country?

Gandin and Apple (2002) conceptualize thin versus thick democracy. A thin democracy offers the illusion of choice (such as citizens voting in elections), whereas a thick democracy "focuses on an emancipatory education for the excluded" (p 102). A student engaged in the work of thick democracy learns about the oppression of others by the state and society and works to develop solutions that enable full participation in society by everyone.

Exploring the connection between education and democracy raises the following questions: In what countries has education enabled the roots of democracy to take hold? What countries use education to build patriotism but not democracy? What stories are we telling students, through a hidden curriculum, about what they should value?

Through this exploration, I hope to make clear that we must be intentional about what we want out of civics education. As Biesta (2007, 747) notes, "Schools may have exemplary curricula for the teaching of democracy and citizenship, but if the internal organization of a school is undemocratic, this will undoubtedly have a negative impact on students' attitudes and dispositions towards democracy."

The Correlation Between Education and Democracy

In discussing the role of education in the Arab Spring, Campante and Chor (2012, 168) observe,

> A vast body of evidence confirms that individuals with a higher educational attainment consistently exhibit a greater propensity to participate in the full spectrum of political activities. . . . This positive relationship holds true in virtually any survey dataset that asks about political engagement, even after controlling extensively for other individual traits such as age, gender, and income.

A narrative that came out of this series of revolutions was that when there is a rapid elevation in education levels, people will cease to support undemocratic regimes.

A strong correlation exists between well-functioning democracies and well-functioning education systems. In fact, the correlation coefficient between the democracy index and years of schooling is 74 per cent (Glaeser, Ponzetto and Shleifer 2006). Moreover, many studies positively correlate higher levels of education with an increasing likelihood to participate in democratic life (Sondheimer and Green 2010).

Glaeser, Ponzetto and Shleifer (2006) discuss two key explanations for this correlation. The first is that civic participation follows naturally from increased ability to communicate (that is, to read and write). The second explanation is based on human capital theory: educated people are likely to see better results from their activism and civic participation and are, therefore, more likely to spend the time necessary to participate. These two explanations come together when we look at a situation such as the Arab Spring.

Further, the correlation between education and political activism is even higher in societies with relatively low economic opportunity (Campante and Chor 2012). This aligns with social capital theory. In a well-functioning economy, educated people, who are relatively well off, are more likely to use their time to better their individual circumstances, rather than seeking collective political action. However, when people have fewer opportunities, such as in Tunisia and Libya before their revolutions, the incentive to increase one's personal well-being through collective action is much higher.

Education also raises communication capabilities. Because the citizens of Arab countries were educated, they were better able to take advantage of their social capital to communicate with each other through meetings, speeches and social media. In other words, they had the skills to effectively organize, as well as the incentive to do so.

On a microlevel, there is also substantial evidence that certain types of civics education help increase both student agency and the likelihood of students' participation in civic and democratic life (Luff 2022). As Kahne and Sporte (2008, 754) note, "What happens in classrooms can have a significant impact on students' commitments to civic participation."

Teachers can adopt several practices to support the civic engagement of students. They should endeavour to create a democratic classroom, where students feel comfortable asking questions and where their input and knowledge are valued. As well, they should seek to engage students in hands-on, community-focused service projects (Kahne and Sporte 2008; Rogers 2009; Sobel 2014). A focus on

justice-oriented civic activity makes students aware of historical and current systems of oppression and encourages activities that break down those systems (Hernández and Castillo 2022).

Overall, the research reveals a strong correlation between education and democracy and also shows that specific types of civics education can successfully increase democratic participation in young people. However, this is often not the case in the classroom. As Biesta (2007) points out, "Many young people singled out the school as the environment with the least opportunities for taking initiative, having a say and being heard—the environment with the least opportunities for action and being a subject."

Education as Social Reproduction

What about autocracies with widespread and high-quality public education? There are several clear exceptions to the overall trend that more education means more democracy.

China

China is an obvious example of an autocracy with a high-quality education system.

In the 2018 test cycle of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), where tested, China ranked first in nearly every category (OECD 2019). China offers free and compulsory public education for nine years, for children aged 6–15. A large share of students (around 30 per cent) go on to attend university.

China goes to great lengths to point out just how progressive and democratic its education system is. For example, a government-funded research paper (Li and Chen 2013) uses John Dewey's ideas as a basis for explaining how the presence of a *banzhuren* (homeroom teacher) and "classrooming" (classroom governance) create a classroom that is "a real world to live together, to develop individual and community, and to experience and experiment [with] democracy."

This government-approved view contrasts with the account of Mosser (2010), an American who served as a visiting professor at a Chinese university, teaching a course on the American Constitution and Bill of Rights. Mosser describes how Chinese students never spoke in class and how questioning the instructor was considered disrespectful. This account is more in line with the overarching view of China as an increasingly strict autocracy, where "there is an overwhelming submission to power, involuntary or voluntary, among Chinese people including intellectuals; and this submission to power leads to widespread censorship and self-censorship in academia" (Yu 2020, 16).

Several authors note that China lends itself to authoritarian government more easily due to the influence of Confucianism (Mosser 2010; Yu 2020). This philosophy, which is a core part of Chinese culture, values strict adherence to rules and social hierarchy as a means of maintaining harmony and order. Since the late 1980s, perhaps as an action against rising student activism, the government of China has identified a form of Confucian values to be taught in schools, such as "loyalty to one's country, commitment to serving one's people, social responsibility, respect for authority, and self-discipline" (Yu 2020, 20).

Beyond the infusion of authoritarian values into education in China, another factor to consider is China's strong economy. As Yu (2020, 17) notes, "The one-party political system is married to a market economy, and that marriage has produced unprecedented economic prosperity which has, in turn, justified the current political system for many."

Thus, a strong economy that keeps people relatively wealthy, combined with the culture of authoritarian values taught in school and an overall fear of the state, may keep people in China from acting against their government.

Cuba

Another country to consider when thinking about education and democracy is Cuba.

Cuba is widely considered to have the best education system in Latin America (Bridges 2020). Postrevolution, an early initiative of Fidel Castro was to ensure that the entire population of the island was literate (Blum 2011). Today, Cuba has a literacy rate of 99.7 per cent.[1]

Cuba is a particularly interesting case. Given that it has gone through long periods of very low economic prosperity and also has a highly educated populace, one might think that Cubans would have overthrown their communist government by now. That Cubans remain steadfastly patriotic despite the country's lack of economic success may be partially attributed to the core values taught in their education system.

Bridges (2020) interviewed people in Cuba and identified the values the Cuban education system purposely and intentionally focuses on: "honesty, solidarity, and patriotism" (p 142). Intentional teaching of these values, combined with youth service organizations and government propaganda, "provided Cubans with such a strong sense of identity that they were willing to go through what was the most difficult period in their history knowing that they could survive together" (p 143).

Additionally, Cuba has continually been on the receiving end of American foreign policy meant to devastate its economy. This gives the Cuban government an antagonist

to point to—a common enemy of the people. Having this common enemy may also be part of why Cubans have not been quick to revolt.

As the example of Cuba shows, education can serve as an excellent means of reproducing social values rather than a means of reproducing democracy. That Cuba explicitly includes the aims of patriotism and solidarity in its curriculum may be a reason the country has been so successful at staving off another revolution.

Saying One Thing, Doing Another: The United States and Civics Education

Let's turn now to the United States. The country repeatedly emphasizes its commitment to democracy, yet it has taken a strong turn toward authoritarianism, both with the election of Trump and in overall attitudes toward democracy.

A 2011 survey found that around a quarter of young Americans thought that democracy was a "bad" or "very bad" way to run a country (Kahlenberg and Janey 2016). Many fingers in academia point to the idea that this trend is due to a changing landscape in education since the 1980s that has both de-emphasized the teaching of civics and emphasized increasingly individualistic values, often through a hidden curriculum (Hernández and Castillo 2022; Hytten and Stemhagen 2020; Kahne and Sporte 2008).

As we saw with China and Cuba, education appears to be an effective tool for social reproduction. Thus, what we choose to emphasize matters.

Hytten and Stemhagen (2020) note that since the 1960s, the United States has repeatedly chosen to emphasize science and math over the social sciences (specifically, civics). This was originally a purposeful response to a perceived deficit after the Soviets appeared to be winning the Space Race with the launch of Sputnik. However, the trend has continued long after the point when the United States managed to land a man on the moon.

A key element of this continued trend was the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. This legislation paired funding with test results and focused on testing only reading, math and science. Since then, the United States has seen much less emphasis on teaching civics (Bullough 2022).

All these shifts reflect how education is valued as a way to increase economic productivity and to get a job, rather than as a way to create civic-minded citizens of a democratic nation. They can also be traced to the increasing neoliberal mindset that if something doesn't directly benefit the economy, it isn't worth our time.

Overtly, the United States has been actively removing civics education from curricula in favour of more "marketable" subjects, such as math and science. But what is the hidden curriculum saying?

Most schools and classrooms in the United States are still what one could call authoritarian. Schools generally follow a strict hierarchical structure: principals, teachers, students, custodians and so on. Classrooms are generally led by teachers, who choose what will be taught each day and lay out the rules of conduct. McDaniel (1982, 246) asserts, "That is the nature of a school, and teachers by definition must exercise the authority of their office. This is their major responsibility as an employee of the school system."

Apple (1975) emphasizes that schools choose to shy away from conflict. Students who follow the rules are generally rewarded. This is the hidden curriculum.

In a current trend in the United States, charter schools that target low-income and often racialized populations tend to be the most strict and authoritarian. These "no excuses" schools have strict rules and high expectations. However, their pursuit of high scores on standardized tests means that they often leave out aspects of a well-rounded education (Lamboy and Lu 2017).

It is very telling that those who are targeted by the most authoritarian education are those who would be most likely to protest systemic injustices and racism. Moreover, these students are being kept away from a democratic education that would give them more tools for engaging in such activity.

Since the research shows that more-democratic classrooms are more likely to create democratic citizens (Kahne and Sporte 2008), teachers must consider what the structure of their schools and classrooms is implicitly telling students. It is not surprising to me that those who spend 13 years being rewarded for following the dictates of authoritarians continue to choose authoritarian-style leadership after graduation.

Neoliberalism: The New Hidden Curriculum

Labaree (1997) describes what he sees as three overarching aims for education that have been prevalent in the United States since the onset of free public schooling:

- Democratic equality (student as citizen)
- Social efficiency (student as taxpayer)
- Social mobility (student as consumer)

We could ascribe these aims to Canada and other places, as well.

This concept goes to the heart of why the assumption that schools support democracy is problematic. How countries conceptualize schooling and its purpose is a fundamentally political issue. Do we want schools to create citizens that uphold our democratic institutions? Or are we looking for citizens who steadfastly follow rules and authority?

Torres and Puiggrós (1995, 5) write, "Since public education attempts to create a citizen as a 'disciplined pedagogical subject,' the role, mission, ideology, and training of teachers . . . are all marked by the prevailing philosophy of the state." The prevailing philosophy of most states in the Western world over the last 50 years has been neoliberalism, which seeks to increase control by private enterprise and decrease the control of the state. A political war has been waged for the hearts and minds of citizens on behalf of corporations and international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (Luff 2023). As a result, we see more and more focus on schools as sites that reproduce the values that reflect Labaree's (1997) third aim of education—social mobility and student as consumer.

An example of this hidden neoliberal curriculum is found in the rise of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) schools. These types of programs are popular across the Western world. Parents have been told that we have a skills gap and that we should prioritize these subjects over others, because people with STEM skills will be more employable and able to find high-paying and high-status jobs (Hytten and Stemhagen 2020).

However, Hytten and Stemhagen (2020) address the shaky foundation on which STEM schools are often built. There is not a real gap in skilled workers for STEM jobs, and the United States is not actually behind in global competitiveness in this area. They find, ultimately, that "it is not hard to show that a hidden curriculum of STEM education is to elevate a market ethos above a human one, and to fuel corporate greed" (p 29).

The language of competition and employability, spurred by international testing (such as PISA), can be found everywhere, and students could be forgiven for assuming that the only purpose of school is to make them economically viable once they leave it. Students constantly ask teachers, "How will I use this in real life?" and "How will this help me get a job?" They have internalized the neoliberal position that school is there to help them succeed as a consumer in the economy, not as a well-informed citizen in a democracy.

All of this is part of an effort—sometimes subtle and sometimes overt—to actively redefine democracy as capitalism and to suggest that as long as citizens have choice as consumers, they live in a democracy (Apple 2017).

What Now?

While the evidence shows a high correlation between education and democracy, there is stronger evidence that education reproduces the values that are taught explicitly (through the curriculum) and implicitly (through the hidden curriculum). This concept of social reproduction helps explain how some countries remain autocratic even while having a highly educated population. It also explains how countries such as the United States are developing autocratic tendencies through schools that reproduce consumerism and authoritarianism.

I think it is fair to say that while a highly educated populace helps to maintain a democracy, and even to create one, whether education benefits democracy is highly dependent on the values a country chooses to instill into its curriculum. Countries that educate for democracy, such as Finland, generally get good democracy (Murgatroyd and Sahlberg 2016). Countries that educate for obedience, such as China, generally get obedience.

Is what we call education actually education? If education is not reproducing democratic social principles, is it more like indoctrination? This is an interesting question. I think that there is some space between social reproduction and indoctrination, but as with so much in education, that space is fuzzy. The question warrants further consideration.

Overall, the lesson teachers should take away is that we must take teaching and what we teach seriously. We must be extremely conscious of the values we are reproducing, and we should ask ourselves what students are learning in our classrooms and schools, particularly through the hidden curriculum.

Additionally, citizens should ask themselves what they want out of public education. How valuable is democracy to you? Do you want to see democracy reproduced?

Finally, those who create curricula must re-evaluate their commitment to life in a democratic society. A vast body of evidence shows that even a "good" democracy, such as Canada's, is not very democratic (Loat and MacMillan 2014; Wilson-Raybould 2021). How can we expect our citizens to fully participate if our elected members of Parliament are not even enabled to do so?

If it is important to us to live in a democracy, there are many areas on which we can focus. Much work still needs to be done in terms of sustaining and improving democracy as a whole. However, if we wish to maintain the rights and freedoms we possess in the Western world, we must be much more intentional about what we are doing in our schools.

Note

1. "Literacy Rate by Country 2025," World Population Review, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/literacy-rate-by-country.

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