

V. 15 N.1 (#81) Fall 2005 \$12.00

OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

Porto Alegre
Citizen Schools

Rock the vote BC

Character education or
citizenship education?

LIVE8 debate

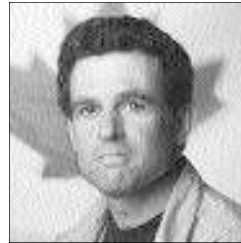


**Joel Westheimer on
Schooling for
Democracy:
one size does NOT fit all**

Joel Westheimer

Democratic dogma: There is no one-size- fits-all approach to schooling for democracy

In the past year, Canadians have wrestled with a host of social policy concerns that call for the kind of rigorous public debates that are the hallmark of democracy. During the 2004 General Election, for example, access to adequate health care figured as the highest priority issue for 32% of Canadians.¹ Not surprisingly, politicians, policymakers, and media pundits gave the issue widespread attention. Prime Minister Paul Martin promised to invest \$9 billion dollars in health care and social programs, sparking opposition parties to weigh in on taxes and “fiscal responsibility.” The public became both witness and participant in explosive debates about commitments to a social contract that has in many ways distinguished Canada from its southern neighbor. In the next few years, the kinds of policies that might be enacted to address the health concerns of Canadian citizens are like-



OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

ly to be further debated. Other issues will figure highly in the public psyche as well. Concern over trust in government and political leaders, the growing national debt, and calls for democratic reform of the political process itself already vie for public attention.

In many ways, these debates mark the health of one of the world's more respected democracies. Politicians express varying positions on issues of public concern. The media carry a variety of views and perspectives. Through election campaigns, a free press, and community discourse, politicians and the broader public debate those policies most prominent in the minds of the people these policies will likely affect. Ideally, as Aristotle envisioned, democratic citizens thus move themselves and each other "from individual ignorance to collective wisdom."

However, as Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter point out in their study of U.S. citizens' political knowledge, the "quality of the public debate [on such issues] and thus ultimately the quality of the reforms that emerge, depend on two things: the nature of the information brought to the public marketplace and the ability of citizens to use that information to discern their interests and to articulate them effectively."² Unfortunately, recent studies indicate cause for concern on both counts. Canadians' knowledge about public issues, and perhaps more importantly, their ability to connect particular perspectives on these issues to political parties and candidates, is disturbingly low. Which party or candidate wanted to use half of the budget surplus for health care and social programs? Which party hoped to adopt a national prescription drug plan? Which wanted to repay the national debt? Which hoped to lower income taxes? Which party was against affording Quebec "distinct society" status? A majority of Canadians were unable to answer these questions correctly. In fact, out of 15 such questions, only one in ten correctly associated more than three of the positions with the correct party.³

Other kinds of knowledge important for meaningful political participation in our democracy fare poorly as well. Knowing the names of major political leaders and contenders, how parliament functions, how social policies have been implemented in the past, and basic historical facts about Canada and global affairs all elude a large number of Canadians.⁴ If, as Rousseau asserted, the right to vote

should be accompanied by an obligation to be knowledgeable in public affairs,⁵ our democracy might be in trouble.

Perhaps more disturbing is that all of the trends that lead politicians and pundits to talk about the growing democratic deficit are seen in sharpest focus among youth and young adults. As Brenda O'Neill reports from her study of youth participation, younger Canadians are "less likely to follow politics closely; are less politically knowledgeable; [and] are significantly less likely to [vote or] see voting as an 'essential' democratic act."⁶ Although some of these differences can be attributed to stage-of-life, it is becoming increasingly clear that the declines in participation among youth constitute a profound generational shift: young people are participating less in community, local and national affairs associated with democracy than were their counterparts of previous generations.

Schooling for democracy

While everyone seems to agree on the need to address the so-called democratic deficit among youth, the question echoing in the halls of parliament, on the pages of newspapers, and in public conversation is: "How?" Not surprisingly, many see schools as the answer. After all, there is no public institution that has the capacity to reach a greater number of young people in a sustained and meaningful way. Furthermore, schools in North America have always been closely linked to democratic goals. "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves," Thomas Jefferson wrote in his famous 1820 letter, "and if we think [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education." Belief in the fundamental importance of education for democracy has been long-standing.

But if educators can agree that schools have an important role to play in educating democratic citizens, they can't seem to agree on what that might mean for teachers and students in classrooms and schools. Some believe that the best way to teach democracy is through rigorous study of the workings of government, the history of democratic institutions, and the hard-won struggles in which

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

democratic societies have engaged in order to preserve and strengthen democracy. Others hope teachers and students will take education outside the classroom into the community so that academic goals can be better matched to social and community projects. Still others want schools themselves to become more democratic; these advocates point to the presumed hypocrisy of teaching about democracy in a profoundly non-democratic institution like the traditional school.

Which is the best method? As in so many questions in education, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Much depends on the specific goals implied by “educating for democracy.” Democracy means different things to different people, and among educators and school reformers, the aspects of democracy seen as most important and the best methods for furthering these goals both vary a great deal. Since the focus for this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* is on the democratization of schooling — specifically finding ways to give students meaningful experiences participating both in the school community and in the larger community beyond the school walls, I intend to focus on these goals in this essay. But before we zero in on the school as a democratic community, it makes sense to ask ourselves what kinds of goals we have in mind when thinking about the ideal kinds of citizens we hope to foster.

What kind of citizen?

In research colleagues and I conducted over the past decade⁷, we identified a number of programs in the United States and Canada that aimed to advance democracy through schooling. From our studies, we found that three visions of citizenship emerged that were helpful in sorting through the variety of goals these programs embraced: the *personally responsible citizen*; the *participatory citizen*; and the *social justice-oriented citizen*. These descriptions are meant as illustrations and do not imply that any given program must fall into one and only one of these categories. Rather, these are helpful ways to discuss differences in ideology, goals, and means of the broad array of educational programs that seek to foster democratic participation. We describe the visions as follows (see also Table 1):

The personally responsible citizen. Personally responsible citizens contribute to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteer to help those less fortunate, whether in a soup kitchen or a senior center. They might contribute time, money or both to charitable causes. Both those in the character education movement and those who advocate community service requirements would emphasize this vision of good citizenship. They seek to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline and hard work. Or they nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer community service.

The participatory citizen. Other educators see good citizens as those who actively participate in the civic affairs and social life of the community at local, state and national levels. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government and other institutions (e.g., community-based organizations, churches) work and about the importance of planning and participating in organized efforts to care for those in need, for example, or in efforts to guide school policies. While the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive.

The social justice-oriented citizen. A third image of a good citizen, and perhaps the perspective that is least commonly pursued, is of individuals who critically assess social, political and economic structures and explore strategies for change that address root causes of problems. The vision of the justice-oriented citizen shares with the vision of the participatory citizen an emphasis on collective work related to the life and issues of the community. But these programs emphasize preparing students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about social movements and how to effect systemic change. If participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and individually responsible citizens are donating food, the justice-oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Table 1. What Kind of Citizen? (from Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)

	Personally Responsible Citizen	Participatory Citizen	Justice Oriented Citizen
Description	Acts responsibly in his/her community	Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts	Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes
	Works and pays taxes	Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment	Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice
	Obeys laws	Knows how government agencies work	Knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change
	Recycles, gives blood	Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks	
	Volunteers to lend a hand in times of crisis		
Sample Action	Contributes food to a food drive	Helps to organize a food drive	Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes
	Core Assumptions	Core Assumptions	Core Assumptions
	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question, debate, and change established systems and structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time

Although educators and policymakers tend to make claims about the interconnectedness of these different visions, our research suggests that — in practice — it's not that simple. For example, programs that pursue a vision of the *personally responsible citizen* by encouraging students to volunteer or give to charity do not necessarily advance students' abilities to critically analyze the root causes of social problems and suggest possible solutions. Students working in a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter might provide important direct services for individuals in need, but might do little to affect social policies that might diminish the need for these services. At one community outreach event I attended celebrating the efforts of a New York City shelter, the Executive Director proudly announced that the shelter was now serving three times as many meals as in the previous year. When asked by a reporter whether this was good news or bad news, he seemed mystified by the question.

Conversely, programs that emphasize a social justice vision of the “good” citizen might do a fine job of having students ask tough questions about social justice, politics, and power struggles but may not always succeed in developing in students the habit to go out into the community and — as reflected in the name of one popular US program — *Do Something!* Armchair activists might talk a good game when it comes to critiquing unjust government policies but shy away from community action that might actually effect change. Sound familiar?

There is little evidence from studies of actual programs suggesting that the pursuit of one set of goals necessarily furthers another. Programs that seek to teach students how to participate in the community (the participatory vision of citizenship) do not always delve deeply into root causes of problems; programs that focus on character education and on being a *personally responsible citizen* rarely teach students to organize for legislative action; and so on. Yet, despite the clear differences in goals for improving society, most educational programs claim to be accomplishing everything as if the goals themselves were interchangeable.

I am not advocating for one kind of goal or another (although I do find a strict focus on volunteering, charity, and character education troubling when not also accompanied by deeper questioning and

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Teaching students that there are poor people in Canada does not guarantee a critical examination of economic policy.

critical analysis). Rather I am making the point that pursuing one kind of vision of citizenship does not automatically advance learning consistent with another vision. Teaching students that there are poor people in Canada does not guarantee a critical examination of economic policy, for example. And although teaching students to help those in need might be important in teaching people to be good neighbors, one might argue that it is not about democracy at all. Indeed, being generous, honest, and hard-working are goals that are as likely to be pursued by government leaders in any totalitarian regime as by those in any democracy. Chinese leader, Hu Jintao, would be as pleased as Canadian Prime Minister Martin were all citizens personally responsible. Most importantly, regardless of what kinds of programs colleagues and I study, we consistently find that reach exceeds grasp: that claims about teaching towards multiple visions of citizenship often are mismatched to the content and pedagogical approaches employed.

So, what to do? Once we've identified particular democratic goals for education, how might we best pursue these goals in our classrooms and our schools? Our studies of programs and policies have taught us some interesting lessons in this regard. First and foremost is that there are no magical connections between pedagogical approaches to teaching and the underlying values or ideology taught by the lessons. While teaching styles, the arrangements of the classroom, and the organizational schema of the school certainly matter, without attention to the substantive values conveyed by the content of the lessons themselves, there is little guarantee with regard to the kinds of democratic practices students might learn.

Enduring myths about education for democracy

Two opposing myths stand out as examples of democratic dogma when it comes to the relationship between pedagogy — the style of

teaching employed — and the kinds of vision of the good citizen educators hope to pursue. Although many educators have made the case that pedagogy and content are connected, even here, there is still no one-size-fits-all formula.

Myth #1: The only way to teach democracy is to fully model it in the classroom and the school

Few educators would argue with the idea that context matters. It is not just the content of what we teach that is important, but also how we teach and the condition of the surrounding environment in which we teach. Indeed, what is modeled for students might be more important than the books they read or the class lessons in which they engage. Nowhere might this be more visible, for example, than in the appalling conflict between what teachers are supposed to teach regarding democratic participation and the non-democratic nature of teachers' workplaces. As Marita Moll observes, schools "purport to prepare students for participation in a democratic society, but they fail to recognize the disconnect between what they teach and how they are governed"⁸ "Do as I say and not as I do" seems a naively hopeful reflection of the way many teachers and students experience lessons about democracy in schools.

Yet, many (self-proclaimed) progressive educators insist that only by modeling democracy in the classroom and school can we teach any valuable lessons about what it means to be a good democratic citizen. After visiting dozens of school programs throughout Canada, the United States, and elsewhere, I am more convinced than ever that the kind of teaching for democracy pursued in schools varies at least as much as the different visions of the good citizen discussed earlier. There is no one pedagogy matched inextricably to certain kinds of educational outcomes.

Interestingly, those educators who might place their goals for democratic education most squarely in the social justice camp, are also those that often make the case that social justice can only be taught through the kind of "progressive" pedagogy that engages the students in every aspect of the curriculum — deciding what should be taught, choosing the focus of inquiry, researching the issues, and presenting to peers what they have found. Yet how many of those

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

After visiting dozens of school programs ... , I am more convinced than ever that the kind of teaching for democracy pursued in schools varies at least as much as the different visions of the good citizen discussed earlier.

school reformers and practitioners first recognized the need for political engagement by sitting through a university lecture by a dynamic professor who changed the way they thought about history, politics, and social justice? Daniel Perlstein wrote a superb study of Mississippi Freedom Schools of the 1960s showing, in part, that although their message was always deeply democratic and oriented towards social justice, their pedagogy was not.⁹ Indeed, Lisa Delpit, in “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Teaching Other

People’s Children” argues persuasively that some Black parents and teachers view progressive pedagogy as a concerted effort to keep less advantaged students from learning the “culture of power” that progressive change towards justice demands.¹⁰ In her eyes, some parents of African American children would prefer that their children be told exactly what to do, how to spell correctly, the rules of grammar, and so on, because these rules and codes of the culture of power are exactly what their children need to know to get ahead. “If you are not already a participant in the culture of power,” Delpit writes, “being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.”¹¹ So — gasp! — direct instruction, when used in this way, might be a means toward an indisputably democratic goal.

The absence of a monolithic relationship between particular teaching strategies and related educational goals works the other way as well. There have been many successful efforts throughout history in teaching profoundly non-democratic lessons through what appeared to be democratic means. Most of us associate fascism with goose-stepping soldiers marching on order from above. But one need only examine the methods of the Hitler Youth brigades to note how “progressive” were aspects of their pedagogy — inclusive (within their group at least), community-oriented, highly social, col-

lective, and cooperative.¹² The medium, it would seem, does not always make the message.

Indeed, one of the fathers of progressive education himself — John Dewey — broke ranks with the Progressive Education Association that he had founded because of the dogmatic homage to “child-centred” pedagogy that began to grip the organization. In *Experience and Education*, he writes passionately that “an educational philosophy which professes to be based on the idea of freedom may become as dogmatic as ever was the traditional education which is reacted against.”¹³

To be sure, teaching for democratic understanding requires attention to the democratic (or non-democratic nature) of the classroom and the school in which the teaching occurs. But it is clear from examining the myriad of excellent programs that abound that educators need not limit themselves to one particular strategy to achieve democratic learning goals. Rather, truly progressive educators might do better to examine the underlying beliefs and ideological assumptions conveyed by the content of their curriculum. Teaching for democracy and teaching democratically are not always the same. To the extent that an overemphasis on pedagogy detracts from a clear examination of the underlying content and values of the lesson, the conflation of pedagogy and content might serve to conserve rather than transform educational goals.

Myth #2: Knowledge always precedes action

On the other side of the ideological spectrum lie those convinced that facts are the holy grail of education in democratic societies, or for that matter, any society. Witness the current obsession with standardized tests that seek to find out all the pieces of information tidbits that students don't know and punish teachers, principals, and the students themselves accordingly. The calls for “Back to Basics” education and the late night television comedy shows that seek out citizens who can be caught not knowing answers to “basic” questions are symptoms of this counter-educational trend.

These policymakers and politicians mistake the logic of what needs to be taught with the logic of how one learns. In *The Child and the Curriculum*, John Dewey distinguishes the “logical” from

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Truly progressive educators might do better to examine the underlying beliefs and ideological assumptions conveyed by the content of their curriculum.

the “psychological.” By logical, he means the sensible ordering of the curriculum into steps and categories to make it possible to undertake the enterprise of teaching. But the “psychological” represents the child — how the child learns, what interests and experiences the child brings to the learning encounter. To teach means to move back and forth between these two reflections of the educational context, to guide the learning according to adult

notions of what needs to be taught all the while maintaining a keen focus on the interests, experiences, and ambitions of each individual child. We must not confuse the logic of what we teach with how we teach.

The implications for democracy can be seen in the tensions that arise when teachers seek to teach about democratic participation within school and classroom settings that are myopically focused on the narrowest possible conception of “knowledge.” Not only do students tend to learn more “facts” through authentic participation in meaningful projects of concern, but engagement in such projects of democratic importance is rarely driven by the acquisition of facts only. In short, knowledge does not necessarily lead to participation. In many programs we studied that emphasized teaching about the workings of democratic government, legislative procedures, elections, and so on, students gained solid factual knowledge without necessarily gaining the inclination or the conviction required to participate. In fact, we found that often it worked the other way around: participation led to the quest for knowledge. Once students gained experiences in the community, they tended to ask deep and substantive questions that led them to research information they knew little about and, until then, had little inclination to learn.

Furthermore, the hidden curriculum of non-democratically focused classrooms too often emphasizes pleasing authority rather than developing convictions. In these classrooms and schools, it

would be difficult for students to stand up for what they believe through authentic participation in community affairs. Current classroom discourse too often reduces teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to make principled stands and participate democratically in social and political affairs. A third-grade teacher I know noted that we seem to be surrounded by adults who have lost the ability to be outraged by outrageous things. Healthy outrage — a critical element of democratic improvement — needs to be nurtured rather than stifled in school.

Anyone exclusively concerned with what is being taught in school without proper regard to what students do when they graduate would do well to reflect on the words of British philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer: “The great aim of education is not knowledge but action.” Or, as John Dewey insisted, genuine teaching, when successful, results in students “knowing how to bring about a better condition of things than existed before.”

The many paths to education for democracy

Consider the following three school programs and ask yourself which one, in your mind, is teaching democratic participation. The first school, Capital High School, teaches democratic citizenship through lessons on personal responsibility and through a provincial requirement for community service. Since Ontario students must each complete 40 hours of volunteer community service in order to graduate, teachers at Capital help students find volunteer activities in the community, helping out in soup kitchens, cleaning up parks, and assisting in hospitals.

Teachers and administrators in a second school, which I will call The Laura Secord School, engage students in lessons about how government works and emphasize participation in civic affairs. Teachers in this school model civic participation by involving students in classroom and school-wide decisions. By enacting democratic principles within the school, these and other like-minded educators hope to develop and sharpen students’ democratic citizen-

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

ship skills, and dispositions. They also feel that democratic citizenship requires that students know about laws and about legislative procedures.

A third school, “River Valley,” has as one of its central curricular missions to teach students about social justice, about how to improve society, and about specific ways to affect change such as community drives, grass-roots campaigns, and protests.

Although I’ve changed their names, each of these schools is real and each is confident that the school is engaged in citizenship education for a democratic society. What kind of citizens does each of these schools want its students to become? Will students like those in Capital High School, who volunteer in the community become “good” citizens? Do mock trials or studies of the local legislature constitute citizenship education? Is a classroom or school that is governed democratically like the Laura Secord School better suited to impart democratic lessons? Or, the last school I mentioned — is an emphasis on social justice the key to democratic ideals?

Not many people agree on what a good democratic citizen does. Some programs are based on the belief that good citizens show up to work on time and pay taxes. Other educators endorse the view that citizenship entails acting decently toward the people around you. A few programs seek to teach students to help shape social policy on behalf of those in need. They want students to become aware of the difficulties involved in changing the circumstances that lead to rivers or parks being dirty or to individuals and families being hungry. And each of these schools employs a variety of pedagogical strategies in efforts to realize their educational goals.

Different goals? Yes. Different pedagogies? Yes. The important thing is to ask ourselves what kinds of democratic goals we are hoping to achieve and continue looking for as wide a range of strategies as possible for getting there. Democracy is not self-winding. We need schools to help our students make sense of their place in the community, the nation, and the world. But we can’t accomplish those goals if we are stuck in our own dogma about one-size-fits-all teaching approaches. There are many ways to teach for democracy. Democratically speaking, that is the message those interested in broadening the purposes of public education must convey.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Data from the 2004 Canadian Election Survey. Institute for Social Research, York University. www.ces-ec.umontreal.ca.
- ² Delli Carpini, Michael and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- ³ Gidengil, Elisabeth, André Blais, Neil Nevitte, and Richard Nadeau. 2004. *Democratic Citizenship in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press: 57-67.
- ⁴ Gidengil et al., 2004.
- ⁵ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1968. *The Social Contract*. Harmondsworth: Penguin: p.57.
- ⁶ O’Neill, Brenda. 2001. “Generational Patterns in the Political Opinions and Behaviour of Canadians: Separating the Wheat from the Chaff.” *IRPP Policy Matters*. 2(5): 15.
- ⁷ See for example, Joel Westheimer & Joseph Kahne (2004). “What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy.” *American Educational Research Journal*. (41) 2, 237-269; and Kahne & Westheimer, 2003. “Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need to Do.” *Phi Delta Kappan*. 85(1), 34-40, 57-66..
- ⁸ Marita Moll, Summer 2004. “Participatory Citizenship: Walking the Talk.” *Education Canada*. 44 (3): 45.
- ⁹ Daniel Perlstein 2002. “Minds Stayed on Freedom: Politics and Pedagogy in the African-American Freedom Struggle.” *American Educational Research Journal*. 39: 249-277.
- ¹⁰ Lisa Delpit. (1995). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people’s children. In *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (pp. 119-139). New York: New Press.
- ¹¹ Delpit, p. 127.
- ¹² Suner, H. and Otto, H-U. (eds.) (1997) *Education and Fascism. Political identity and social education in Nazi Germany*, London: Taylor and Francis.
- ¹³ John Dewey. 1916. *Experience and Education*. Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press.

Joel Westheimer is university research chair in Democracy and Education and professor of Education at the University of Ottawa where he also co-directs Democratic Dialogue (www.democraticdialogue.com), a research collaborative for inquiry into democracy, education, and society.