

“The best way to discover how a functioning democracy works is to practice it”

- Noam Chomsky, 2000, p.28

Introduction

The Berlin Wall fell the day before my third birthday. Throughout the early years of my life and my public education in particular, I did not really think about democracy. To me, the progress of liberal democracy was the natural course of history. Sure, some folks had to fight for this progress, but it appeared to me that those who had chosen to stand on *the wrong side of history* were acting in folly. Rights would increase, inequality would decrease, the world would get better for all. History was taught, and consumed by me, in terms of a catalogue of mistakes from the past, powered forward by technological advancements and growth in rationality. Things were better today than yesterday, and tomorrow would be a step forward for us all.

Of course, growing up a white, heterosexual male in the United Kingdom - a country with considerable influence on the international scene - I had not really been exposed to ideas or attitudes that led me to question the completely false sense both of progress and British manifest destiny. My history class was laden with jingoism and backed up by stories from my grandparents, who yes suffered during the war, but had come to see the time in a positive character and nation building sense.

The now much maligned writer Francis Fukuyama (1992) declared after the fall of the Berlin Wall and subsequent dismantlement of the Soviet Union, that history was over. What surely would follow was the world would uniting under a progressive liberal capitalist hegemony; globalization would lock in national economies to mutually agreed international stability. But since the early 2000's, Fukuyama's theory that was shared by many at the time, began creaking under a series of global events. In her 2016 Massey Lecture Jennifer Welsh declared that 'history was back', pointing to Russia flexing its muscles on the international stage, the rise of Trumpism in the United States, and an unsettled European Union, particularly in the United Kingdom opting for the Brexit over continued cooperation and integration with its neighbours. This is not to mention the continued unravelling of the Middle East following the 'War on Terror', and undemocratic regimes emerging in Turkey, Thailand, Hungary, Philippines and Venezuela. Time will tell what the impacts of the global Covid-19 pandemic bring forth, but as we enter a new decade at the start of 2020, the geopolitical realignment since 2016 does not show signs of dissipating. The idea of unfettered faith and progress in liberal society is not just being called into question, but appears to be actively regressing across the world. Underpinning these tensions worldwide is an erosion of democracy.

What is democracy?

Democracy is based on the idea that people should decide in creating the rules from which they are governed, an equal voice for all. In modern day practice this often means indirect democracy: citizens electing other citizens of their country to develop laws. Democracy as we know it in the Western world emerged in Ancient Greece, with the term a combining the people (*demos*) with power (*kratos*), entering the English lexicon in the United Kingdom around the mid-16th century with the gradual extrication of power away from a monarchy towards a parliamentary system.

Multiple models of democracy have emerged since that time, each with its own variation of governance. David Held (1996), considered one of the foremost theorists on democracy, outlines how it can be broadly divided between six forms: *classical*, *developmental*, *protective*, *participatory* and *direct* democracy. *Classical* democracy does indeed stem from the Ancient Greeks, with its traits include mass meetings, the election of public officials by lottery or election, engagement and participation by large numbers of the Athenian population. The overriding belief was in the rule of law and justice, and that wide and deep engagement and debate amongst the citizens (limited as this may have been) was seen as paramount.

Republicanism and liberal democracy each split into two variants: *protective* and *developmental*. *Protective* democracy flips the view of government from being of the people, to protection of the people from its incursion. Protective democracy is employed by citizens to protect their rights and freedoms through the election of representatives, who are sectioned between different spaces of governance (such as the executive and the legislative), all of which fall under a constitution - the supreme document of government and the people. The intention behind *developmental* democracy is one that sees governance as designed to enhance the moral and self-development of individuals. As with protective democracy, the underlying view of government is that it should be kept at arm's reach from the citizens (preferably government would be decentralized), with developmental democracy being limited to the protection of citizens when their liberty is at stake. A constitution, division of powers and regular elections are all marks of this model of democracy.

Participatory democracy differs from the aforementioned as there are no elected officials, and decisions of governance are debated and mandated by large gatherings of citizens. In a contemporary form, political parties have emerged as a replacement for the body to decide a course of action, to smooth the procedures of governance. Equality, rights and liberties are prioritized in participatory democracy. Finally *direct* democracy, which aligns with Marxist notions of grassroots governance. Elements of Marxist direct democracy include periodic elections, and the ability to recall a representative for failure to serve the people, with decision-making led by referendum and initiative - this predominantly takes place within the 'commune'. In addition to these four main models of democracy are competitive elitist

democracy, pluralism, legal democracy and participatory democracy (p.4-6). Defined by the Government of Canada, our parliamentary process is a representative democracy, much like that of the United Kingdom where a number of our traditions are inherited. (Library of Parliament, accessed on March 21th, 2020).

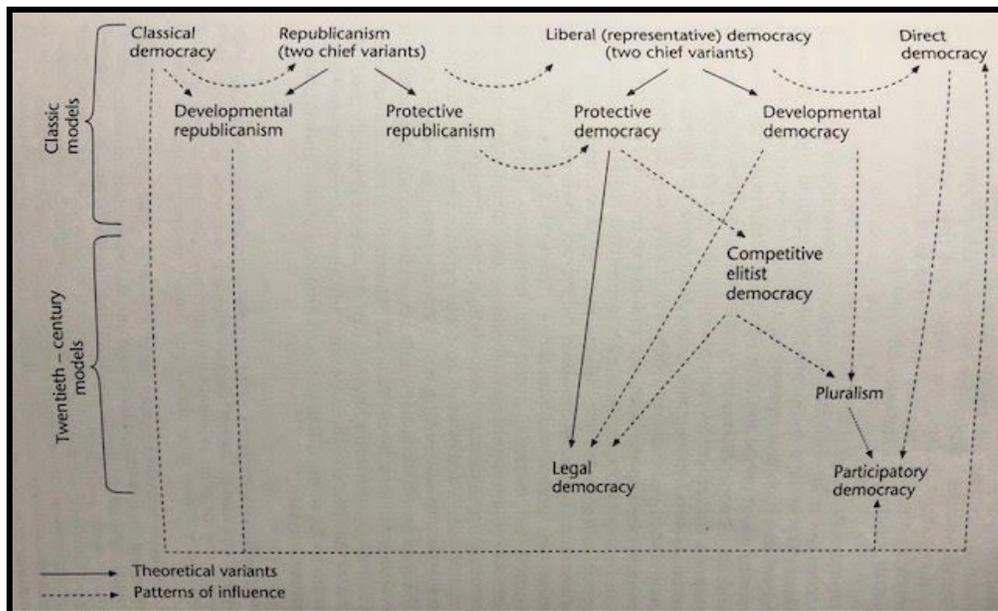


Figure 1: Models of Democracy, Held, (2006).

Too often, our understanding and subsequent engagement with democracy begins and ends at the ballot box. As citizens we often view it as our responsibility to vote, but less to think around the ideas and actions that fill the time between election cycles. In the last few years conversations around democracy in Canada have been centred on questions of how we vote and elect rather than what the responsibilities of citizens are in those intervening periods. A view of democracy that only considers voting is part of the problem it currently faces - it cannot be boiled down to voting alone. It is how we think and act during elections, particularly in our schools that concerns me, and will operate as the focus of my discussion in this paper.

A concern around democratic understanding and practice is one that has been simmering for years. In 1996, David Held wrote that,

“as an idea and as a political reality [democracy] is fundamentally contested. Not only is the history of democracy marked by conflicting interpretations, but also ancient and modern notions intermingle to produce ambiguous and inconsistent accounts of the key terms of democracy, among them the proper meaning of ‘political participation’, the connotation of ‘representation’, the score of citizens' capacities to choose feely among political alternatives, and the nature of membership in a democratic community” (p.xi).

Professor of Political Science at York University, David McNally (2002) suggests that our model of democracy is “based upon the ideal of a demobilized and de-politicized demos who, because they are not governing themselves become detached and alienated from the political process” (McNally, 2002, p.274). It is this paradigm that I am looking to contest, specifically with the beliefs, language and moves we make as teachers in the education system.

Inside and outside of the school building, democracy requires transcending a view of merely voting for government officials, and demands active ongoing participation in society. Today, writes Astra Taylor (2020), democracy is an ever evolving system of living as well as governance. A pure fulfilled democracy may never exist, but the idea of it must continually be considered and worked towards (p.2). What can she mean by this? In its essence Taylor argues that the fundamentals of democracy, being rule of the majority are correct. But what she advocates for is continual ongoing engagement with the project, continual tweaking of the model, and importantly, that this emerges from the bottom up - from the people. Many of us retreat from participating in causes when we either become disillusioned with the process and our ability to affect change, or when we do not perceive that there is any reason to focus our attention, because things are moving along well. Taylor argues that we need to see democracy as a way to understand and act throughout all realms of life, be it culture, business, employment healthcare, the environment or education (p.9).

Taking a cue from Taylor, I will argue that we are currently sliding away from strengthening and improving democracy, and that this should demand that collectively we re-engage with the process. Importantly for this discussion, democracy requires a bottom up approach, which sets public schools and the practice of education as a prime locus for these efforts. I consider education as playing a role in the reinvigoration of democracy, but do so while taking into consideration broader geopolitical trends, specifically around the dominant economic ideals of neoliberalism and anti-democratic forms of governance such as fascism. At times these two elements share common traits and repurpose the language of freedom to serve their own ends.

Against these wider trends, I propose that teachers think about their work through a democratic lens, and utilizing four pillars: that democratic education can be presented in both content and delivery, and for us to approach our work with a deep consideration of empathy and equity. This will not be easy, particularly as I consider schools are coercive spaces for both students and teachers. Yet the democratic project is both vitally important for educators to actively engage in, and further, schools provide fertile ground and freedom to take up this work, should we choose to do so. To begin with, a consideration of the current state of democracy globally.

Democracy Now

The authors of the most recent Democracy Report (Foa, et. al., 2020) found that “dissatisfaction with democracy has risen over time [in Western Europe in the last 50 years and globally in the last 25 years], and is reaching an all-time global high, in particular in developed democracies” (p.1), with democracy currently in a stage of ‘malaise’ (p.2). Dissatisfaction with democracy globally now sits at 57.5%, an 18-point increase since 2005. In the region categorized as ‘Anglo-Saxon Democracies’ (the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), “the proportion of citizens who are “dissatisfied” with the performance of democracy in these countries has doubled since the 1990s, from a quarter, to half of all individuals” (p.18). Canada currently sits in the zone of ‘concern’, with a tenth more Canadians dissatisfied with democracy than in the mid-1990’s. There has also been a notable uptick since 2015.

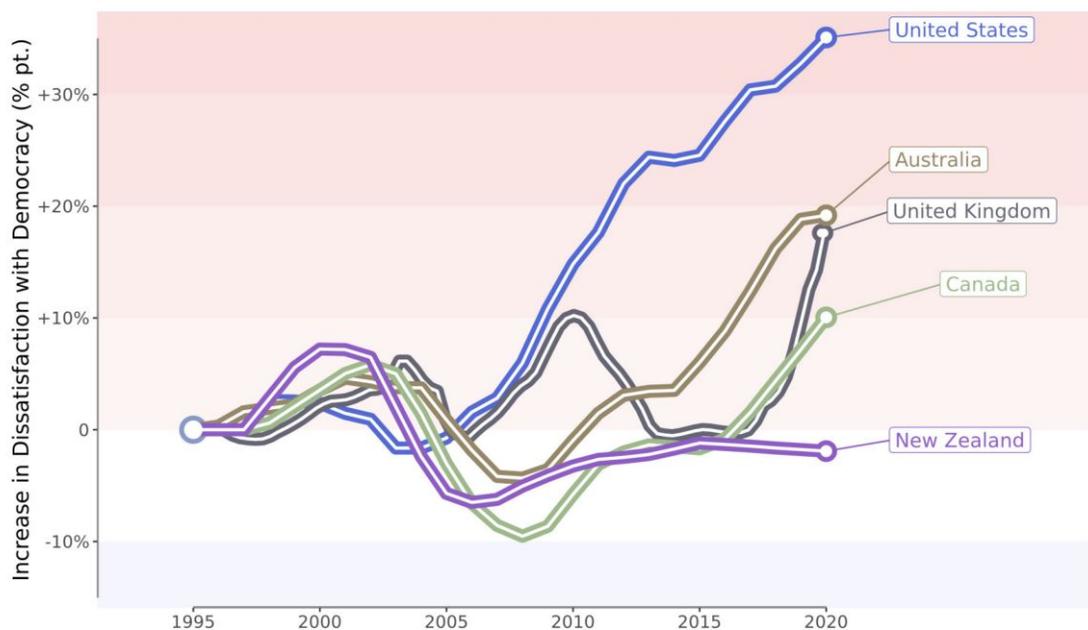


Figure 2: Change in Satisfaction with Democracy since 1995 from baseline level, (Foa, et. al, 2020).

Why the change? Foa et. al., provide a few considerations: firstly, the burst of countries shifting towards democratic forms of government since the end of the Cold War having levelled off; secondly the fragility of democracy has been exposed in recent years, with the financial crisis of the mid-2000’s, failed foreign policy and overseas interventions, which has provided fertile ground for the emergence (or reemergence and expansion if you consider South American governments of the 1990’s) of populism. From a governance perspective, the authors claim that

“the most likely explanation is that democratically elected governments have not been seen to succeed in addressing some of the major challenges of our era, including economic coordination in the eurozone, the management of refugee flows, and providing a credible response to the threat of global climate change. The best means of restoring democratic legitimacy would be for this to change” (p.42).

Linked to why governments are not perceived in addressing any number of the aforementioned is due to the widespread adoption of neoliberalism over any other approach to the economy.

Emerging in the 1970's from the Chicago School of Economics, spearheaded by Milton Friedman, the doctrine of neoliberalism quickly grew from a niche group of economists, to a small but powerful group of leaders in the United States, China, and the United Kingdom. Emerging from the years 1978 and 1980, through to today, where for the typical industrialized country voter, it has become the undisputed principle of economic theory; how many of us can envision an alternative to capitalism? David Harvey (2005) details the central principles of neoliberalism as characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade. In this view, a state government's role should be to retreat from interference in economic matters, and strictly focus on the defence of these markets through military, defence, police and the creation and enforcement of legal protections of markets. Sections of the economy that do not currently have the omnipresence of markets - say the atmosphere of earth, oceans, public spaces such as parks, or education itself - should be opened up to the market through privatization, rather than government regulation. Politicians since the late 20th century have been swept away in the wave of globalization that sought to draw more countries into an international market of trade leading to individual increases in prosperity.

Privatization has been driven forward under the guise of ‘freedom’ - a concept that has been effectively co-opted by neoliberals and free-market thinkers, particularly through international interventions, economic and military. Michael Apple (2015) claims that this poses a problem for democracy, as freedom a word no longer exclusively linked to ‘thick’ democratic values and actions, specifically the freedom to be and participate fully in a democracy as an individual. While economic barriers may prevent such engagement, freedom should not pertain to choice in the marketplace for trade and consumerism (p.312), as this is a ‘thin consideration of democracy. Instead, democratic freedoms should extend in his view to protections from persecution based on ethnic, religious, gender identities, or freedom to access acceptable levels of well-being regardless of physical or mental impairment.

Harvey (2005) claims, the design and implementation of neoliberalism was and remains a class project, with its aims to reestablish or entrench an affluent capitalist elite. The result of removing restrictions over banking and the flow of global capital, wholesale selling off of state assets to private enterprise, establishment of ‘free-trade deals’, and relinquishing of government control or restraint of the mechanisms of capitalism has proved highly beneficial for the upper class. As most parties or politicians running for national elections in Western nations adopt in

whole or part the doctrine of neoliberalism, it has become interwoven with democratic governance to the extent that citizens find the difference imperceptible.

The global recession of 2007 is a global event from which we can draw a line to the current crisis of democracy. This economic earthquake can be seen as a direct result of the removal of restrictions on the banking sector, the immediate and long-term ramifications of which caused chaos around the world. At present we are still seeing the fallout from the mid-2000's; it is impossible to decouple the turn away from democracy by many nations from the adoption and implementation of neoliberal economic policy in the last 40 years. It remains to be seen what the most recent recession resulting from a global quarantine will do for the democratic project, but as Will Jennings, Political Science professor at Southampton University claims, history suggests that populist and reactionary politicians will bounce back slowly in the wreckage of another financial meltdown. Caroline Fleschi of the Global Policy Institute at University of London echoed these thoughts. She believes that “no matter how much governments – and, of course, the EU – have done, it will never be seen to have been enough. No incumbent leader can run on a platform of ‘but it could have been so much worse’. And that’s the populists’ opportunity” (Henley, 2020).

In the last decades, rather than questioning economic policy, voters have turned away from the democratically elected leaders that have been selling neoliberalism in all its TINA (‘there is no alternative’) glory. Writing in the Guardian, Aditya Chakkroborrtty (2019) suggested that the existence of communism kept capitalism honest, and saved it from itself. The threat of a communist revolution terrified many in the upper class, but its existence was largely positive for the rights of the working class. It acted as a global counterweight and ensured that leaders in capitalist democracies worked to serve those other than the upper class through ongoing improvements to standards of living, such as higher wages, public investment and strengthening social safety nets. All, in essence, to hold back the threats to the existence of capitalism and pacify the proletariat masses. Rather than the end of history, as Fukuyama believed, the dissolution of international socialism was viewed as an outright victory for capitalism, opening up the world for unchecked capitalism. Today, quite rightly, Michael Apple states, “to ignore the fact that capitalism(s) have become truly global and exert immense highly destructive power over so many people's lives fails to seriously engage with the realities that billions of people face” (Apple, 2015, p.302).

There are, of course, many who list the positive impacts that modern capitalism has brought to many people, particularly those of developing industrial countries. Academics such as Steven Pinker (2018) and Hans Rosling (2018) have pointed to reduced violence, war poverty, infant mortality, deprivation and increased life expectancy and a growing middle class. These have been huge developments for humankind. Yet as the authors point out, these statistics are often ignored. Instead, what is becoming apparent is the concept of ‘relative wealth’, because although global poverty is actually *declining*, in the last thirty years income inequality has *widened* vastly (Zitelman, 2019). As analyzed by the Harvard Business Review, this has left

voters in many Western nations doing better than in past generations, yet feeling worse off, because those in the middle or upper class are just doing that much better. The authors state:

“As the very rich get richer, they extend the range of the income distribution. In a practical sense, that means even if you are a member of the relatively well-to-do middle class, some things start getting priced beyond your reach, such as private schools and houses in the best neighborhoods. There might also be a psychological reason for the effect: an increase in the share of income held by the richest 1% can make you feel as if your chance of moving up the ladder and becoming very rich yourself is growing increasingly beyond your reach” (De Neve & Powdthavee, 2016).

On a range of economic indicators, those leaving high school at the time of the global recession have become the first generation on record to both feel and to statistically be worse off than their parents (Elliot, Guardian, February 14, 2016).

Another dimension that David Wallace-Wells (2019) rightly points out, is that the idea of ‘human progress’ has resulted predominantly as a result of industrial capitalism powered by fossil fuels and specifically the massive impacts seen in China, meaning the trade-off to increased wealth in the immediate future will be climate change (p.141). It is beyond the parameters of this paper to explore how global government inaction on reducing carbon emissions and transitioning to a green economy will impact democracy, but it is hard to imagine that the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced will not lead to increasing pressure at all levels of government.

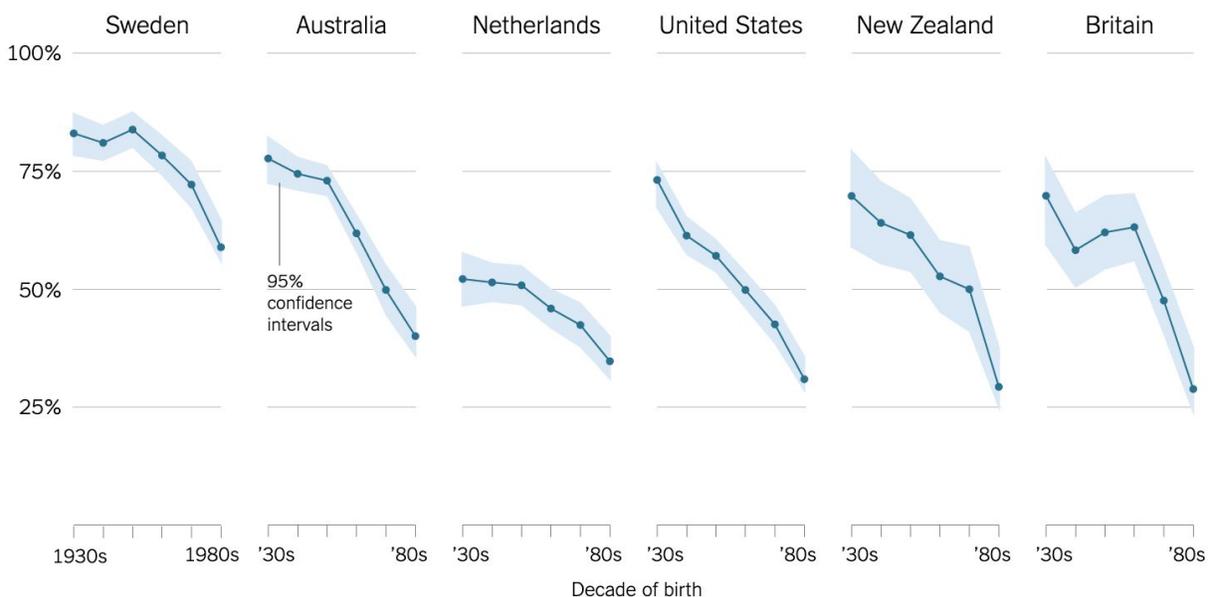


Figure 3: Percentage of People Who Say it is Essential to Live in a Democracy, (Taub, New York Times, November 26, 2016).

There may be no better barometer alerting us to the breakdown in progress than this reality. It becomes a problem for trust in democracy when every party and politician is adopting a neoliberal platform, and an even bigger problem for the future, as the economic squeeze on youth is coupled with concerningly low voter turnout and faith in democracy - a trend that has been emerging over the last fifty years, but is of significant concern to those termed Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born 1997 to present) (Taub, New York Times, November 29, 2016).

It might not be surprising to hear that neoliberals are inherently suspicious of democracy, considering it a threat to individual rights and constitutional liberties. Instead neoliberals prefer governance by elites who rule through executive order and resort to the court system as a way to resolve tensions and conflicts over parliamentary debate and consensus decision making (Harvey, 2005, p.66). Coupled with the downward trajectory of needing to maintain democracy and its principles, this has allowed a space for strongman to emerge in nations considered 'democratic', such as the United States, Brazil, Russia, Hungary, and to some extent the United Kingdom for example. Leaders of these countries have all flirted with, or outright owned the label of fascism.

In the vacuum left by the plight of democracy, fascism has grown in prominence. Fascism is a problematic term, with a variety of subtle differences depending on the time and place. In our contemporary context, historian Timothy Snyder (2017) defines fascism as the promotion of feeling and emotion over rationality and fact. It appeals to a tribal instinct that divides people along human constructed lines - whether that be skin colour, religion, place of birth or sexuality. Fascism develops the notion of the mythical society that can be reached by the leadership of a 'strongman' (and it usually is a man), who protects the purity of a group against the chosen 'other'. I do not mean to suggest that our contemporary world faces the choice of democracy or some form of fascism (such as authoritarianism, totalitarianism, dictatorship), but trends that have historical precedent in the inter-war years of the 19th century are reemerging in the 21st century.

When we analyze history we can see that education has been weaponized to ease a transition away from democracy. In the twentieth century, Bolshevik Russia, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Communist China have all undertaken a restructuring of national education systems to align with the new truths advocated by their regimes (Martinez, p. 98). Recently, more subtle changes in curriculum in Russia and India have led to outrage amongst those supportive of liberal democracy (Mountain, 2017). It serves to underscore the powerful role that education, specifically of a younger generation plays in what knowledge, attitudes and actions citizens bring forth and utilize in preserving or transforming a territorial or national culture.

For now, Canada appears to be insulated from the emergence of such figures beyond our borders. Yet problems with democracy in our country remain. People and society in a local and global sense are growing restless, and I would like to suggest that looking to notions of democracy in a historical, contemporary, theoretical and practical sense might provide us in

education with some guidance in navigating these new waters. What is particularly concerning about the plummeting support for democracy is that, “a belief that democratic ideals and practices can in the long run be protected *only* if their hold on our political, social and economic life is *extended* and *deepend* (Held, 1996, p.4). Public education is fertile ground for undertaking such work, but for this to happen, teachers themselves need to be aware of how democracy might exist and flourish as a practice in the classroom. Democracy is an experiment, writes Raoul Martinez (2017), and while in its contemporary form there is much room for democracy to fulfil its potential, “the right to conduct this experiment is something for which we need to continually fight... the future of our world depends on both the outcome and nature of this fight” (p. 307). Are we meeting these demands in our classrooms today? Before we explore answers to this, we need to reckon with the role of coercion in the school, an implicit and ignored trait embedded in the daily life of teacher and student.

Coercion

The design and operation of the school has not kept pace with that of Western industrial society in the last century and a half. On a daily basis youth are asked by adults to perform tasks with the threat of punitive action taken if they fail to comply. Failure to complete tasks A, B or C, may lead to missing recess, a visit to the Principal’s Office, a call home to parents or a suspension. Learners who do consistently comply with the requests of a teacher may not actually be consenting to the learning being done to them - when faced with the option of doing what has been asked, or risk being extracted from the group, a stern lecture from another adult, or the wrath of an upset parent upon arriving home, there does not appear to be much choice on offer. Donalddo Macedo (In Chomsky, 2000) calls teachers ‘paid functionaries of the state’, whose role is to “engage in a form of moral, social, political, and economic reproduction designed to shape students in the image of the dominant culture” (p.3). Teachers may not have the Minister of Education sitting in the corner of our classroom every day, but that does not mean they do not feel the pressure to conform to the role of an educator who teaches youth to prepare them for a non-specific future. In stressful situations, humans fall back on comfortable and predictable behaviors; for teachers, this may mean teaching as they were taught - using coercion as a means to hook students into learning, rather than them consenting to engage.

The coercion applied by teachers is not done so in a malicious sense, but as a result of coercion applied on them to deliver a curriculum meeting the expectations of a Principal, next year's teacher, or an arbitrary level on a standardized test. This pressure moves up the chain of command to Principals, Superintendents, and Ministers of Education, Provincial Premiers, and ultimately the voters who voted them into office. In our current political climate, we might hear ‘accountability’ but see it as just a rebranding of coercion, aligned more specifically under economic pretences. Macedo again: “far from the democratic education we claim to have, what we really have in place is a sophisticated colonial model of education designed primarily to train

teachers in ways in which the intellectual dimension of teaching is often devalued... our so-called democratic schools are based on an instrumental skills-banking approach that often prevents the development of the kind of thinking that enables one to ‘read the world’ critically” (In Chomsky, 2000, p.3-4).

The result of this model is that for a number of youth, schools are hostile environments and spaces to be avoided. Considered the first step towards a secure life is a high school diploma which can be used to access further doors of work, money, health, personal meaning. The decision of a youth to step out of public education prior to graduation has ramifications that last generations; socio-economic status is the biggest predictor of academic success. Despite the law in Manitoba stating that every child must attend school until 18 years of age (or with the completion of a graduation diploma), the choice to attend school is real, but one that is not a realistic option for many.

The social contract is very much alive in our classrooms today and forms one part of the socialization of youth into the norms of society, with the curriculum itself playing a role. Elliot Eisner is credited with coining the term ‘hidden curriculum’ which refers to values, views, behaviours that emphasize competition, consumerism and private ownership that are present under the surface of the written curriculum. In the hidden curriculum, certain forms of knowledge are omitted, while individualism is valued as the source of success over collaboration which legitimizes existing class dominance (Sanchez & Barber in Steinberg and Canella Eds., 2012). Eisner writes that the hidden curriculum differentiates from the implicit curriculum, as the implicit curriculum includes considerations such as the organizational structure of the school, pedagogical rules and even the school building itself (Eisner, 1979).

Schools, writes Eisner, are ‘educational churches’, the Gods of which are economy and efficiency (Eisner, 1979). Similarly, Carspecken (in Steinberg and Canella eds., 2012, p.65) argues that the hidden curriculum in schools subtly socialize children differently based on class, race and gender, “in a way that has functions for the division of labor and distribution of wealth in society as a whole” (p.65). According to Apple and Giroux (in Breunig, 2005), “the ideals and culture associated with the dominant class were argued to be the ideas and content of schooling. Therefore, knowledge and classroom practices also affirm the values, interests and concerns of the social class in control of the material and symbolic wealth of society” (Breunig, 2005, p.113). Importantly, the hidden curriculum remains covert in the structure of a school or in the language of curriculum.

If we take a step back from a micro analysis to a macro analysis that sees the school situated within wider society, we can see that coercion in the classroom is merely a replication of coercion outside the classroom. Unless I am self-employed, I feel obligated to follow the directions of my boss for fear of some form of disciplinary action, or being fired from my work. The idea of the ‘social contract’ espoused by Thomas Hobbes over 350 years ago is still true today. How, Hobbes wondered, could a government keep the unwashed masses in their place, specifically to protect the property owning elite? A moral code of behavioral expectation was

conveyed to citizens, whereby they handed over a number of freedoms in exchange for the protection afforded by a government. There was no consent for this act, and failure to comply could render you facing the daunting prospect of being hung, drawn and quartered (punishment, that thankfully most countries on earth have seen the good sense to do away with).

Maxine Greene (1978) makes the wonderful literary analogy of ‘mystification’ as seen in Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick*, to the hidden curriculum. The plot sees Captain Ahab set sail with a crew under the auspices of a regular whaling hunt. The reality, as the crew gradually become aware, is that the voyage is instead a ‘manic quest’ for the destruction of the white whale. Yet mystification is employed by Ahab for the “full terror of the voyage must be kept withdrawn into the obscure background” (p.53). When we think of Eisner’s use of the adjective *hidden*, he is suggesting that we bring light to it, so that we may assess its values and question its use. The question is, can a classroom function in terms of meeting learners needs without relying on heavy use of coercion? Sanchez and Barber (in Steinberg and Canella eds., 2012) believe that teachers must take change in “transforming oppressive structures in society using democratic and activist approaches to teaching and learning” (in Steinberg and Canella eds., 2012, p.432). The application of democratic principles to the content and delivery of a learning space is a step towards reaching this goal, while mitigating the coercive or hidden intent embedded within the school. I would like to argue that teachers can play a role in breaking the chain of oppression, by adjusting our practices in the classroom.

Democratic Education

An understanding of the role of coercion in education aids not just recognition of the educational spaces we are entering, but also how we might approach drawing in democratic practices. How we think about the school, as operating in dialogue with society, not as outside and removed, is vital for developing an understanding of how democratic practices might relate between the school and society. Apple and Beane (1995) define a democratic school as,

“one that is involved in finding practical ways to increase the meaningful participation of everyone involved in the educational experience, including parents, local residents and especially the students themselves. From their experiences, we can see that this goal is attainable through the creation of learning communities within each school and between the school and the larger community” (p.101-102).

In their 1995 work, they delve into examples of schools that are practising democratic thought and action. These include profiling an U.S. inner-city school that focused on a Deweyian form of student-directed inquiry and character development, a vocational program that sought to ground learning in academic rigour, a middle school governed by teachers and parents with an explicit anti-racist curriculum, and a school that sought to increase student voice through the design and implementation of a integrative curriculum. The themes that link these schools are shared interests, freedom in interaction, participation and social relationships.

Early on in the 2019/20 school year Seven Oaks School Division Board of Trustees approached the Superintendents Team to speak on what schools were doing around promoting peace and justice. On a Thursday evening in September, I gathered with about 100 teachers and students in Garden City Collegiate for an evening in which students and teachers shared conversations around critical self-reflection and deep learning around notions of democratic schools. For the most part, it was an opportunity to hear from students - what powerful learning were they engaged with? One early years teacher presented to the group on a project around fairness. Another asked his students to talk about a unit on human rights - which rights mattered to them and why. During the discussion, teachers created space and called on students to share their thoughts, prompting them for feedback on questions they had.

For me, there were two emergent themes from discussions: firstly, that there was significant reported focus on human rights and citizenship education in the early years; secondly, the high school students reported enthusiasm for after-school groups, led by passionate teachers that allowed them to meet with like minded peers to discuss and plan participation in work that mattered to them (this included an environmental group at Garden City Collegiate, and a Black Student Union at West Kildonan Collegiate). It was clear that there were pockets in Seven Oaks School Division where learning and action that could be categorized as democratic were present.

A number of thoughts surfaced for me in the days following, most apparent of which was the dichotomy between early years and senior years. In the early years, students moved through teacher-led experiences. Alternately, at the senior years students had to look beyond the hours of the school day to find opportunities for democratic learning - there were no opportunities, at least in those presented, that took place within the classroom and the school day. Certainly, students spoke of the teachers who 'got it' - those who advocated for them between 9:00am and 3:30pm or beyond. But for these learners, there were few opportunities for them to direct any learning or school policy. Granted, this was a small sample size, but students from across grade levels did not feel that they had a voice in their schools or education. For them, finding a space to connect with like-minded learners around issues they felt were of value were pushed to the margins of the school day, and relied on a dedicated teacher to run an extra-curricular program. The presence of democracy within the school day was limited.

The discussion that evening led me to think about our school spaces and the learners that interact with them. What voice and choice did they have in what and how they undertook coursework? Were students able to draw their work in co-curricular learning into their school day? Would students know how to raise a concern about an issue or concern within the classroom? Would they feel empowered in either case to engage with the adults in their school to drive their learning in a direction that was more meaningful to them? Crucially, to what extent were students at the senior years participating in society?

With these questions in mind, the second half of this paper will outline a pitch to the reader: four elements that I posit construe the aforementioned definition of democratic schools. Namely: content (What learning experiences are provided to students?); delivery (What is the

approach of the teacher in this delivery?); empathy (Do we understand our learners? Do our leaders understand others?); and, equity (How are we understanding and supporting those who need it most?). Coupled with this are examples from my practice that have sought to meet the four criteria of democracy in the school. My intent with establishing these pillars is that they can together work towards reducing the frequency of coercion and increase the democratic participation in learning and the community.

The position I take is that democratic education is every teacher's business and as a result I reject the hypothesis that we can and should limit these ideas to the liberal arts courses. There are absolutely avenues for teachers across subject areas to incorporate democratic practices through content and delivery into every learning space in public education, and that is what I hope to communicate with my examples. Democratic education can play just a big of a role in a Grade 12 Physics classroom, as a Grade 8 Social Studies or half-day Kindergarten classroom. Indeed the four pillars of democratic education that are outlined hereout were specifically selected for their capacity to be omnipresent across grade levels and subject areas.

Delivery

As part of educational reform in the last decades has come a philosophy and practice of inclusion. Welcoming all learners to a classroom, accepting them with their peers, rather than extricating and teaching separately has fundamentally changed the learning space of the contemporary classroom. According to the OECD (2008) evidence from studies of primary and secondary schools suggests that such streaming can increase inequalities and inequities, particularly if it takes place early in the education process. Early sorting can also weaken results across the board for learners (p.3). Whereas the traditional approach to special education advocated students being collectively managed in a space away from those estimated to have 'normal' or 'above average' intelligence, today many school divisions have a policy of inclusion. This alternative or progressive approach to special education conversely assesses learners needs, and at times provides educational assistants to support the work of the classroom teacher. The premise of this policy is to keep the learner in the classroom.

Bier (2007) links the work of alternative views of special education or inclusion to the notion of democracy, considering the terms synonymous. She outlines the links claiming that by creating inclusive classrooms schools,

“provide a comfortable, cohesive environment that supports individuality. Isn't this the foundation of our society? Our special education children who learn differently, react differently, and respond differently are integrated with other students who also have differences, whether academic, cultural, or even personal. By doing so, we create a classroom in which we put into practice some of the features of our democratic society, acceptance and equality. We prepare our students to enter a world in which they are to exercise these same behaviors and hold these same values. Here, they are also experiencing certain freedoms they will have in the future. Therefore, we are molding

citizens by creating a microcosm of the society they will fully participate in as adults” (p.177-178).

The practice of inclusion mitigates stigma, increases social interaction, surfaces the abilities of all learners to the teacher, all to which effectively leads to the disintegration of social barriers (p.178). It is also emblematic of a form of governance that is open to all citizens regardless of intelligence - raising the quality of life and empowering all therefore becomes in every person's interest.

Best practice in working within an inclusive classroom is to employ a differentiated approach to instruction. Much of the foundational published ideas around differentiation in the classroom were produced by John Dewey, most explicitly in *Democracy and Education* (2012). Of concern for our discussion is the shift Dewey promoted from a teacher directed model towards a shared community of learning, and the co-construction of knowledge between learner and teacher. As Spencer-Waterman (2006) outlines, this differentiated learning environment provides space for a number of freedoms for students: the freedom to speak, the freedom to question and the freedom to choose. She links the practice of differentiation to democracy, through shifting decision making for learning onto students. The model makes particular demands on teachers, requiring them to release control of a number of aspects of the learning space, away from lecture dominated learning, towards work with low floor and high ceiling, accessible content for all, but that can challenge the more academically able. For this to be successful, learners need to develop a stronger understanding of their skills, needs and interests, but investment of time in this work can raise the competence and empowerment of the learner to feel and become successful.

In my experience this work can be messy and frustrating, but ultimately powerful and yes, a truer representation of the democratic process within the classroom. The direction of learning may fall into an inquiry, problem or project based learning model, where students are afforded a choice in which learning they are interested in pursuing and committing to deep and focused work around that topic. In a differentiated classroom, the teacher works beside the student to link their work with the curriculum. Rather than the teacher alone making a decision what experience, focus, and demonstration of learning is in the best interests of the learner, the learner and teacher work collaboratively towards this decision.

Neurological awareness must be considered in a balanced approach to democratic education as well. Which emerges as an understanding of a child's brain development, and using this knowledge as an educator to make the invisible, visible. Much work has been undertaken in recent years to understand the development of the brain, the most recent of which suggests that the brain does not reach full maturity until a person reaches their early twenties. Until this stage, writes Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience at the University College London, there are large individual differences in brain development and consequently maturity. Blakemore advocates not to look at average brain maturation for a specific age, and rather consider individual needs (p.141). What current

research of brain development in youth across international cultures (and history!) indicates is that sensation seeking behaviors increase throughout youth peaking at 19 years of age, before declining. Conversely, self-regulation increased between 10 years of age and mid-twenties, before plateauing (p.3-4). Crucially for our study is the neuroplasticity of the brain throughout childhood; at this time in a human life, there is an important window of opportunity, that while it does not shut in adolescence, becomes harder to work with. In addition to the brain being more malleable, the learner in the right conditions can be motivated to receive, consider and take on new knowledge that forms their identity and actions.

In my practice I have found particular success when providing choice under an ‘umbrella theme’, a term I use to provide foundational learning experiences and mini-lessons, from which learners can then begin to explore areas of interest and undertake pieces of work that they have greater autonomy in deciding on. The umbrella theme allows the student work to fit within a specific course (or courses) and reduces the burden on them to propose a plan of learning. Working in an elementary school, my Grade 5 class of 32 learners each researched an area of interest under the theme of ‘space’. I had reading levels from Grade 1 to 9, 5 students on individualized learning plans, two students learning English as an Additional Language, and one child in a wheelchair.

I knew I needed to differentiate to support all learners, so I grounded individual investigations through a series of mini-lessons with the whole class, where I modelled research into meteorites - selecting appropriate texts, modelling how to find, skim and read for answers, compiling two column notes (that collected my facts and opinions) before creating a piece of writing that I felt as the creator of the piece, was the best fit for the research and my interest - in this case, a short research paper. I then populated the class with 40 or so age-appropriate texts (that ranged from a Grade 1 to Senior Years level to ensure accessibility) for learners to explore, before tasking them with developing a piece of work that would be collected and compiled along with their peers into a book, which we as a class would publish. The differentiation provided choice for learners to select a specific topic, type of work produced, and leaving the quantity of work submitted open-ended gave academically successful students the stretch they needed to complete more pieces. Gaps apparent in the curriculum were filled with mini-lessons or ‘leaving to learn’ opportunities in the community. Students knew at the end of the unit that their work would be bound in a book that they could take home and share with family, meaning that the process was more authentic. This learning unit provided stretch for all students, for some it led to a single piece of work, maybe a poem or art piece accompanied by a description, for others it was six pieces - a research paper on Saturn, crossword on the solar system, diagram on the moon, newspaper article on the Challenger Spaceship explosion. Having all learners engaged in work that they chose to undertake allowed me more time to work one on one with struggling learners. All students completed work, and all felt some success.

Teachers must be cognizant that all learners, young and old, do not know what they do not know. We cannot expect a child to show interest in trees if they have not seen one, heard

others speak of them, nor thought to question where the oxygen that they breathe comes from. Likewise, if a child spends all of their waking time thinking about, strategizing, playing and scheduling their next game of table-tennis, then we cannot expect them to earnestly show any interest in, say, the 79 known moons of the planet Jupiter. But as I found in the earlier example of the Space Inquiry Project, they might take an interest in the moons of Jupiter if we provide them with appropriate texts, scaffold their work with modelling and create excitement. By taking time each week for students to share their work, along with challenges and successes, I was able to create a culture of rigour, partly as a result of the groundwork I did prior to a release of control to students, but also mostly by making space for the learners to have real choice and real voice. Students did not have complete autonomy, but the topic of ‘space’ acted as a wide umbrella, so that so many questions could be pursued - yes, even aliens and U.F.O’s!

Our role then, must be to bridge these inherent tensions, drawing the strings together and braiding them in a workable and manageable system for ourselves, our learners, but also the needs of wider society. Doing so requires a cycle of conceptualization, experimentation, observation and reflection. It means finding those pockets of freedom for injections of democracy within the coercive space. We must remember that it is not the bricks and mortar or the curriculum documents themselves that are oppressive, but the human - the teacher - decisions that are enacted within and based on policy. A teacher must aim to provide space for students to find the truth for themselves, rather “by mere transfer of knowledge, consumed through rote memorization and later regurgitated” (Macedo in Chomsky, 2000, p.4). Supporting the development of these skills would, considers Noam Chomsky, “[serve] the general public by providing people with the technique of self-defence... [a prerequisite] to achieving a clarity of reality” (Chomsky, 2000, p.9-10).

The work of differentiating learning for inclusive classrooms is a democratic act. Many school divisions in Canada now welcome all learners to a space, a marked development on the past practices of segregating those with actual or perceived learning disabilities. Yet the policy of streaming still emerges in sometimes subtle ways, where we encourage learners not to take particular courses, and provide them with work that does not stretch their capabilities. “Only when schools are freed from the structural constraints that compel them to track and sort students (while telling them they deserve what they get)” Astra Taylor reminds us, “will the promise of universal education cease to be a lie, for only then could educators truly prioritize cultivating curiosity over imposing social control, firing up students instead of cooling them out” (2020, p.227).

A critical element of this work lies in both how we see ourselves as educators and the way we view our learners. If you consider the role of a teacher as an expert in content knowledge, delivery and assessment, then you are elevating yourself above students who become your subjects. Conversely, to sit down at the table with learners and begin the process of understanding them as individual learners, each with distinct abilities, skills and interests, seeing yourself as a learner and an equal too, begins the work of deconstructing the hierarchies inherent

in education. This work allows teachers to hand over control of the learning process to students, acting as facilitators, rather than deliverers of knowledge.

Content

Writing on democracy and education, John Dewey wrote, “democracy cannot go forward unless the intelligence of the mass of people are educated to understand the social realities of their own time” (Kirp, 2015). The remarkable thing about Dewey is that even 100 years removed from many of his seminal texts, his ideas remain remarkably prescient; not only do they still permeate the teaching profession, but they are still regarded as progressive. How then, can we envision such a model of education? Joel Westheimer is particularly instructive in the experiences we can look to develop for and with our learners.

Westheimer (2015) researched citizenship education to answer ‘What kind of citizen do we need for a democratic society?’, broadly categorizing the experiences of students into three categories: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the social-justice oriented citizen. The personally responsible citizen obeys laws, picks up litter, pays taxes, are honest and responsible - essentially guided by obedience. The participatory citizen is active in volunteering, understands government systems, and organizes community improvement. The social-justice oriented citizen is more adept in both critical thinking and action based on that reflection. This latter type of citizen is most closely to Friere’s notion of praxis - a translation of theory into action - with specific emphasis on a critical approach and critique of power (p.39). Westheimer contrasts these practices of citizenship suggesting that the participatory citizen may organize a food drive, the responsible citizen donate food, and the social-justice oriented citizen ask why people are hungry and act on what they discover (p.41).

These models of citizenship can be viewed on a spectrum, with Westheimer particularly advocating the social-justice citizen, because they “think about root causes of problems or challenge existing social, economic and political norms as a way to strengthen democracy” (p.45) For him, a failure to facilitate opportunities for critical thinking and informed action underlies a key element in democratic governance, “the need for citizens to be able to engage in informed critique and make collective choices” (p.45). It should be cautioned not to dismiss beginning with a personally responsible citizen, indeed many classrooms, from elementary to senior years do this. Think about a high school biology class that looks at the environmental consequences of deforestation, the Mathematics classroom that considers quantitative data around an oil spill and clean-up, the English Language Arts classroom that considers questions of gender in a historical context. There may not always be an opportunity with these particular discussions to actually take action as advocated in the social-justice citizen, but that should ultimately be the aim.

The fulcrum from which Westheimer advocates teachers design learning experiences is to bring their learners from awareness to action. Political theorist Henry Giroux echo’s Westheimer’s idea, claiming that youth must expand their dreams and think about what it means

to build a future marked by a robust and inclusive democracy. In doing so, they need to embrace acts of solidarity, work to expand the common good and collectivize compassion. Such practices will bestow upon them the ability to govern wisely rather than simply be governed maliciously (Giroux, 2017).

For learners to take action, first it has to be grounded in a deep understanding of the issue. Chief amongst these are that students know how to think critically, how to ask questions, evaluate policy and how to work with others towards change that moves democracy forward. Educating future citizens for democratic societies requires that schools: teach students how to ask questions; expose students to multiple perspectives and viewpoints on important issues that affect everyone's lives; provide opportunities to analyze and discuss different viewpoints; show that 'facts' are less stable than is often thought; engage controversial issues (Westheimer, 2015, p.99).

In February 2020, three Grade 12 students from Maples Met School had the opportunity to collaborate with the University of Manitoba's Alternative Reading Week, which was a program that paired postsecondary students with local organizations for collaborative, reciprocal project work. Students had been discussing developing a community action project around poverty in Winnipeg. Connecting with the University of Manitoba provided an opportunity for our students to work alongside graduates in a week of dialogue with community members currently or previously experiencing poverty. The community members began by sharing their stories that led them to homelessness, and spoke about their experiences navigating social services and being supported by non-for-profits. The group grounded their conversations in the work of Inner-City Studies professor Jim Silver, and led them to shift from their original idea of a food drive, to workshops targeting middle years students, and eventually to plan for actual political action. Through Alternative Reading Week and the days following, they had shifted the vision of their action from Westheimer's participatory citizen to a social-justice minded one. The role of myself was to provide experiences and texts with design in mind, nudging and questioning the groups intent, but being mindful of not taking control of the project was important to this transition manifesting.

One of the techniques I employed was the Socratic Method. Education in a Socratic tradition insists that we teach students to think for themselves; a student with an understanding in philosophy has "an active control or grasp of questions, the ability to make distinctions, a style of interaction that does not rest of mere assertion and counter assertion" (Nussbaum, p.18). Challenging viewpoints as a 'critical friend', whereby there was overt support for the students in their learning journey, allowed me to monitor conversation, and insert myself when necessary to question the learners ideas, forcing them to reflect and deepen their understanding of what and how they were choosing to proceed with action. This is particularly important when working in social-justice, to avoid accusations of leading students on or proselytizing; we need to support students' efforts, but be sure that they are not just parroting our views, or carrying out political acts on the behalf of teachers.

In Ancient Greece you would see outdoor forums for citizens to enter dialogue with one another, reason, reflect and consider ‘How should one live?’ and we too can turn classrooms into these spaces. Critical thinking and questioning through a Socratic method, guided the practice of democracy (Taylor, 2020, p.10). The rationale for bringing in the practice of Socratic seminar to a classroom for discussion is further outlined by Nussbaum (2010), stating,

“In order to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good, we must produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs... the failure to think critically produces a democracy in which people talk at one another but never have a genuine dialogue. In such an atmosphere bad arguments pass for good arguments, and prejudice can all too easily masquerade as reason. To unmask prejudice and to secure justice, we need argument, an essential tool of civic freedom” (p.19).

From here, learners must move into taking action around issues that they have identified an interest in working on.

At the start of the 2019/20 school year I collaborated with two colleagues to create a unit that integrated Grade 12 English Language Arts with Grade 12 Global Issues. Our work was timed with the Global Climate Strike at the end of September 2020 in mind. Our specific intent was to ensure that all learners could attend the march fully equipped with understanding of the scientific consensus around human-led climate change, the causes and consequences, a view of the future, its context within Canada, an understanding of both sides of the argument, specifically those supportive of oil sands extraction and new pipeline project construction projects in Canada. Over three weeks we took an interactive and multi-modal approach to this issue, which included newspaper article readings, small and large group discussions from a recent edition of *Maclean's* magazine dedicated to the climate crisis. Learners jigsawed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s most recent report from 2018. They watched and debriefed Naomi Klein’s documentary *This Changes Everything*. For the Climate Strike they were tasked with interviewing three attendees to develop understanding of their rationale for striking school or work that day, reporting their findings back to their peers.

Hannah Arendt articulated civil disobedience as essential to the democratic process because it challenges elected authority acting as a ‘consent’ for state activities (Taylor, p.65). Yet for this action to be possible, citizens need to be critical thinkers and willing to take political action. An education system that discourages both of these elements confines participation in democracy. When much of contemporary knowledge is fed to citizens via the forum of social media, youth need to learn how to navigate these forums, effectively process the information, and importantly, take action beyond the realm of the online forum.

There are a number of considerations that a classroom teacher needs to weigh when making decisions about what content to bring into the classroom. These include, but are not limited to, what curriculum they are responsible for, the community in which they are located,

and expanding their understanding of the learners they are working with. Central to understanding these youth is to empathize with them, and to this we now turn.

Empathy

Building off notions of participatory action in the community as a foundation for creating democratic spaces, Coulter (2001, p.95) explains how Jurgen Habermas espouses a vision of different spaces for dialogue between learners and the living world. The crux of Coulter's argument is that for Habermas a democratic life emerges as a result of debate, discussion and persuasion, a form of communicative action in itself, but one that can lead to strategic action - what Habermas refers to as attempts by individuals to influence the world around them (p.91). Central to this view of education is that engagement in the community is carried out with dialogue and results in an informed consideration of what action should be taken. Understanding that results from an empathetic understanding of another's position, or both sides of an argument leads to a deeper understanding of the world, which should inform learners' decisions of the best way to engage themselves with a topic, if at all.

To frame teaching around empathy we need an understanding of how the brain might understand and engage with exposure to empathetic experience. The prefrontal lobe, located behind the forehead is involved in a number of high level cognitive abilities such as intelligence, planning, self-control and empathy. This part of the brain has remarkable plasticity during youth, not just in early years, as often assumed, but through to late adolescence (Blakemore, 2017, p.95). Two points are worth emphasizing here. Firstly, that experience during the development of the brain in youth has a lasting impact on the architecture of the brain later in life (p.64). We have come to recognize that childhood trauma can have a lasting impact into adulthood, while learning a second language from an early age may be easier than later in life. Secondly, these learned behaviors can become automatic in adult life, as research tells us that the behaviors of adults are often a result of 'social scripts' - an amalgamation of past experiences that help us codify, comprehend and act accordingly, with less stress and cognitive effort (p.126). What this suggests for our inquiry into empathy, (or what Blakemore refers to as 'mentalizing' - the ability to attribute thoughts and feelings to other people (p.98)) is that opportunities to connect with other humans and their stories during youth can leave a lasting imprint on the brain that can live on as empathetic actions in adults.

American author Barry Lopez (2019) conceives empathy and compassion as "requisite components on the development of any new politics that aimed to place human welfare, for example, above material profit in a restructuring of national priorities, or in the redesign of domestic economies" (p.412). It was this sentiment that framed a recent project I undertook with Grade 12 students, where we looked to ground learning around refugees in the individual story. We approached this in four different ways, starting from the global to the local. Following an assessment of prior learning (what did the students know about refugees?) students broke into small groups and rotated through stations that included news articles, definitions, videos and

pictures comprising components of the contemporary refugee crisis, concluding with a debrief that alerted teachers to clarifying understandings. We then focused on the refugee crisis in Syria, providing background information. From here learners watched *Inside My Heart*, a documentary profiling three refugee families fleeing persecution in Syria and Afghanistan, as they sought escape to Europe. Following the film, we built in significant time for group discussion, in which it was notable of the emotional impact this film had on learners (indeed, students were still referring to *Inside My Heart* at their public exhibitions of learning three months later). Our lessons then shifted closer to Winnipeg, with students being assigned three stories from *The Lucky Ones* (2013), a non-fiction book by Anne Mahon containing a dozen self-reported stories of immigrants, their story from their home country and their journey to Winnipeg and life as newcomers. A more direct experience came next, firstly inviting Izzy Hawamda, a Maples Collegiate teacher and Palestinian refugee to speak of his experience, touching on the Middle East conflict, followed by Ali Saeed (also known as ‘Barefoot Man’) who spoke of his time as an activist in Ethiopia, his subsequent torture and escape across Eastern Africa leading ultimately to his escape to Canada with the support of the United Nations. Our final experience was bringing the learning even closer to students' doorstep, setting up one-on-one meetings between our students and newcomers enrolled in Seven Oaks Bridges Program. Here the groups got to share their stories, ask difficult questions and confront stereotypes about each other.

The central aim in designing these opportunities for learners was to make emotional connections between the individuals rather than seeing the refugee crisis as a large overwhelming and distant issue. From starting global and circling in on how the global issue impacts students in their community, we heightened the chances of both identifying with their human struggle, and changing their behaviors or actions as a result. It works against the notion of ‘divide and conquer’, which rightly assumes that when groups are separated, with communication and contact limited, it becomes much easier to ‘other’ and dehumanize. By bringing learners from distinct cultures and education settings together, it facilitated an act of collective humanization.

Making room for empathy in the classroom should not be strictly limited to student learning, but must extend to teachers empathizing with their learners. The human bonds that can grow from listening to a youth or their family change our body language and thinking around why they were motivated to act a certain way. Youth too can often feel misunderstood by the adults in the school, which may result in disengagement and resistance to the adults and school environment. If we as educators truly see our role in schools as mentors, then understanding the events that have led a learner to make a particular decision provides an essential context for scaffolding their learning and understanding of how to think or act differently the next time, and imbues a trust in the learner to hear the advice being offered.

Martha Nussbaum (2010) refers to the development of empathy as ‘positional thinking’ - seeing another creatures viewpoint. She cites studies such as Batson’s (1991) work on altruism, who found that if a subject was exposed to an individual story of plight they were more likely to

not only respond with sympathetic emotion, but engaged in helping the individual (p.36-37). Nussbaum argues that it is critical that schools be used as spaces for exposing learners to experiences that increases the likelihood of cultivating empathy. How we might plan and execute opportunities for this should be informed by our understanding of the learners in our classrooms including their prior knowledge and interests, what avenues that connect to curriculum, and who and what exists in the community that we can make concrete connections to through experience.

In *Switch* (2010) Chip and Dan Heath outline a strategy for motivating people to change their behavior. Essential to convincing others is to appeal to their *emotional* and *rational* side. Chip and Dan Heath state that each individual has an emotional elephant side and a rational rider side. ‘Switching’ behavior requires three steps: directing the rider (rational), motivating the elephant (emotional), and shaping the path. In education this might look like learning about germination (rational), while planting and watching a garden grow (emotional) or walking the Mantario Trail (rational) and spending the night under the stars learning about how learners are sleeping on the oldest rock in the world and how it got there (emotional), but then directing these experiences into demonstrating understanding. The rational and emotional components provide curiosity, an openness to experience and the knowledge, before a pathway is created for the student to go further or demonstrate understanding. The emotional component of this strategy might be the invocation of a spiritual experience, the resulting sensation might be the same.

All systems of oppression and exploitation, writes Raoul Martinez (2017), depend on the denial of the equality of empathy (p.347). Does the thought of placing oneself in another's situation increase the likelihood of our actions being more democratic? Empathy is an exercise in imagination - if our conditions were different, what challenges would I face? How would this make me feel? What would I want others to understand? What communication and actions from others would improve my conditions of existence? Martinez continues,

“Fear stifles empathy and elevates hate... fear for our safety, for our jobs, for our children; fear of what will happen if we don’t drop more bombs, lock more people up, keep more people out. Fear drives the cycle of inhumanity that makes good people support terrible things. There are always pressures to distance ourselves from certain groups by placing them in categories of a different status, but as soon as we allow ourselves to do this, we have opened the door to insidious forms of dehumanization” (p.374-375).

So what might we do with our understanding once we have empathized? How might we ‘direct the rider’ as Chip and Dan Heath suggest?

Equity

“The human effort to listen to each other is, for me, one of the most remarkable of all human capacities” writes Lopez (2019, p.307). And to this I would only add, what we do with what we hear is vitally important to the health of our societies. The notion of equity pairs with

empathy well, I would suggest, because if we are truly listening to our learners, to their stories, then we become compelled to act accordingly. Yet to listen, we need to actually sit with what we hear, rather than waiting for our turn to speak.

Equity differs from equality in that it recognizes the inherent systemic differences that exist among individuals within a society. Surfacing these inequities within the education system exists as a monumental shift in policy, implementation, teacher education and practice within the school and classroom. Assuming no prior knowledge of students, when approaching a classroom of learners for the first time, it might be most effective to *start with an equality mindset*, and then *transition to an equity mindset* after developing a deeper understanding of each individual learner's needs. Today, new teachers are more aware than ever of concepts such as poverty, intergenerational trauma, gender bias, oppression of LGBTTQ students, learning disabilities, the impact of these challenges on students, and have become more educated how to work towards mitigating their impacts on learning. They are aware of individual student needs, and that yes, some students require more support and attention than others. The relationship of equity to education takes on both dimensions of content and delivery within a teacher's work.

The OECD has recommended ten steps which would reduce school failure and dropout rates, make society fairer and avoid the large social costs of marginalised adults with few basic skills.

Design

1. Limit early tracking and streaming and postpone academic selection.
2. Manage school choice so as to contain the risks to equity.
3. In upper secondary education, provide attractive alternatives, remove dead ends and prevent dropout.
4. Offer second chances to gain from education.

Practices

5. Identify and provide systematic help to those who fall behind at school and reduce year repetition.
6. Strengthen the links between school and home to help disadvantaged parents help their children to learn.
7. Respond to diversity and provide for the successful inclusion of migrants and minorities within mainstream education.

Resourcing

8. Provide strong education for all, giving priority to early childhood provision and basic schooling.
9. Direct resources to the students with the greatest needs.
10. Set concrete targets for more equity, particularly related to low school attainment and dropouts.

Figure 4: Ten Steps to Equity in Education, (OECD, 2008, p.6).

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) published a policy paper that underlined the need for increased equity in the classroom. They presented two elements of equity: fairness and inclusion. Fairness they articulate is “making sure that personal

and social circumstances – for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin – should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential” (OECD, 2008, p.2), with inclusion, ensuring that learners are participating meaningfully alongside their peers who are not contending with systemic barriers. The OECD further outlined practices within education that can be implemented to reduce the likelihood of individual student limitations not forcing them out of the education system itself (See Figure 4).

Equitable practices include adopting holistic systems of practice to working with learners. This would look like teachers engaging with students, as well as school support workers and families in the decision making process. In a classroom, it requires teachers to develop relationships with learners and make decisions on who, when and how often to spend time supporting their instruction. Ensuring that they are included in classroom learning, providing opportunity for their voice and choice, and critically analyzing what texts, assignments and expectations are placed on learners with a consideration of what they are able to undertake. Most recently in Spring 2020 with the suspension of schools and a shift to online learning, equitable practices forced teachers to grapple with the uneven nature of learning from home. Seven Oaks School Division responded by first ensuring that all learners were able to access devices such as chromebooks by unlocking and sending home, then working with Manitoba Telecom Services to install wifi into the homes that needed it (Macintosh, 2020). On an individual level, I have had conversations with students and families to identify and mitigate barriers to continued engagement and learning, which made apparent that for one student working in the afternoon was easier, as their three siblings were expected to join online classrooms in the morning; for another student, families were overwhelmed supporting younger family members, so it was arranged for an Educational Assistant to support them for two hours a week; for a third learner, conversations were had with family to block off parts of the week for uninterrupted Math learning, where they were free from babysitting family members.

Working through a lens of empathy and equity a picture begins to emerge of a common humanity with an unequal ability to survive and then thrive. Lani Guinier, author, legal scholar, activist and the first black woman to become a tenured professor at Harvard Law School concurs that democracy is more than just about voting or elections. She paints a more textured vision of a fully democratic society, one that trains people to become leaders and active participants in their community. For her, this work is directly linked to notions of affirmative action, a principle that distributes support throughout a society not equally, but based on need (Guinier in Holbrook, 2006, p.141).

How can teachers highlight the need for affirmative action through classroom content? Noam Chomsky argues that we have not learned a great deal from historically dangerous memories considering our propensity to commit barbarism against other groups and nations in the name of democracy” (2000, p.7). In my practice while teaching Grade 11 Canadian History and English Language Arts, we framed our inquiry through the lens of Residential Schools, the Indian Act and Shoal Lake 40. As part of our work, learning was framed around the use of rich

texts that grounded socratic seminars, literature circles bleeding into students' independent research projects. As a class we read *Three Day Road* by Joseph Boyden, which allowed me to link in specific stories from the fictional book to real events, and paired well with our reading of *The Red Indians*, a nonfiction text by Peter Kulcyski that specifically analyzed the impact of the Indian Act through a historical lens through to modern day (and yes, we did dig into the contentious issue of Boyden's tenuous indigenous heritage and questions of his 'right' to write texts from an indigenous perspective). The intersection of issues around Shoal Lake 40, Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop and intergenerational trauma was intended to act as a critique of contemporary forms of racism towards indigenous peoples in Canada, but further, provide the language for understanding unemployment, high incarceration rates, homelessness and additions and consequently a rebuttal to the common tropes aimed at indigenous peoples. In my view, it is critical that decisions around equitable practices in society particularly around vulnerable populations such as indigenous peoples are grounded in an understanding of the historical processes that lead us to the present day. As with empathy, equity can and should be a topic of conversation related to classroom learning.

At its essence our work in education is to work with youth to provide them with the tools for 'the good life'. Yes, today that includes ensuring academic success which evolves into paid employment. But the wider project of improving the life circumstances of all and the planet that sustains us must inform our work in education. Cornel West wrote that "anyone who has the audacity to adopt a democratic vision cannot be optimistic, though I do not conflate optimism with hope. Why? Because democracies are rare in human history, they are fragile, and historically they tend not to last that long" (Roberts, 2012). Public education conceived exclusively as a human capital factory, a vision espoused by neoliberal doctrine, is inherently undemocratic because it prevents the voice and choice of youth exploring the world and engaging with it inside and outside of the school walls today, tomorrow and beyond their graduation. Democracy is fragile, and we are seeing it begin to fracture in parts of the world today. To return to Astra Taylor's thesis earlier, democracy is an idea worth fighting for, but we need both hope and a pathway to move this project forward.

The Way Forward: Participation in Society

With the fall of the Berlin Wall came the view that capitalism had won out and emerged as the supreme unquestioned economic doctrine for many. Facts point to capitalism pulling millions out of poverty across the world, but also of increased inequality within nations, including Canada. In the West, economic disparity between individuals has led to job scarcity, the rise of the temp and gig economy. Viewed through this lens, the democratization of schools project needs to be understood within a wider scope of reinvigorating democracy in society. Freedom should not be confined to the rights of the consumer, but to live, exercise choice and act in dialogue with our immediate and global communities. If learners were freed from the

economic pressures to acquire knowledge like currency and use it to lock down secure employment, and were provided the chance to engage in conversations and action that questioned the purpose of school and life, then we can move towards involvement in democracy to a greater degree.

Unfortunately the neoliberal model has permeated into our schools at a cost to work about and in democracy. This is no surprise, as even in Ancient Greece, democracy was seen as a threat to the ruling class, who toppled it multiple times (with the support of foreign nations). Then, as now, some of the first rights lost were the poor (the demos) losing protection against exploitation and oppression by the powerful (McNally, 2006, p.271). Since that time, the wealthy and powerful have sought to stall and limit enfranchisement and democratic action, despite its entrenchment in the rule of law in countries such as Canada. This includes pushing back on democratic practices in public education.

Social movements fail because they end as resistance and do not provide a path forward. If we are to resist alternatives to a democratic society, then democracy itself needs to be infused into all elements of society, including education. Through the last pages I have sought to respond to the coercive and undemocratic nature of education by providing four ways that teachers can work towards making their classroom more democratic. So the threads of content, delivery, empathy and equity I hope to take and braid together, to increase their strength as a whole more than their individual parts, to forge a path for democracy in our classroom. Like our work in education, democracy is hard. But, Apple and Beane (1995) remind us in a series of case studies on democratic schools, we can choose to be exhausted by following the status quo of a traditional undemocratic approach to education, or “choose to be exhausted as a result of something worthwhile” (p.104).

At its core, this means active participation in society. Contra to this would be passive and non-engagement in society: to be passive is to live in a state of accepting what others do to you without recourse, owing either to a perceived or actual lack of agency; while non-participation is to withdraw to the margins and observe. A traditional classroom might bring to mind children being taught, without the ability to question or participate in the dialogue or construction of learning, to remain at a distance from meaning making, and accept (or reject) the knowledge disseminated. If we are to apply the theory of Lev Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, to deliver content to the learner with no tangible context is to extricate and isolate the learning from the touchstones of personal experience and prior knowledge. The stretch becomes too much, the learner becomes passive and disengages.

But what is this ‘society’ that education needs to constantly occupy and assert itself? George Monbiot has invoked the neglected notion of the commons - a space he describes as containing three elements: first, a resource, such as land, water, minerals, scientific research, hardware or software; second, a community of people who have shared and equal rights to this resource, and organise themselves to manage it; and third, the rules, systems and negotiations they develop to sustain it and allocate the benefits. A true commons, writes Monbiot,

“is managed not for the accumulation of capital or profit, but for the steady production of prosperity or wellbeing. It belongs to a particular group, who might live in or beside it, or who jointly created and sustain it. It is inalienable, which means that it should not be sold or given away. Where it is based on a living resource, such as a forest or a coral reef, the commoners have an interest in its long-term protection, rather than the immediate gain that could be made from its destruction” (Monbiot, 2017).

Clearly, the commons tracks away from neoliberal doctrine and towards true freedom and democracy. When common pastures were enclosed at the dawn of the industrial revolution in England, inequality was exacerbated, rights and voice were marginalized for those that used the space. But it remains a critical place where we need to link with our practice and play a role in revitalizing.

The commons embodies an informed, active, thoughtful engagement in questions around how we can live together as one with the planet. Informed by Jurgen Habermas, David Coulter considers that in our schools that,

“Teachers and students inevitably confront issues of goodness and justice that can ultimately be decided only in dialogue with one another and with other affected parties in which all involved presume that the unforced force of the better argument and not administrative power or position will prevail. In trying to resolve various claims to truth, rightness, and truthfulness, parties inevitably attempt to create certain conditions that support and sustain democratic dialogue. Teachers can become better teachers by helping themselves and their students forge better understandings of themselves, their social world, and their objective world (Coulter, 2001, p.97).

Full active participation in society demands the empowerment and removal of systemic and economic barriers. A neoliberal approach to erecting what is akin to toll bridges preventing individuals and groups from stepping into spaces where they can take on a cause, share a voice, play a role in dismantling restrictions and building a truly open and free society is not democratic. To this, Dewey has suggested, “that secure release and fulfilment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold associations with others” (Dewey, 2008, p.xxix). Democracy happens in dialogue with others in the commons, together working towards the emancipation of the individual for the greater good.

If we believe that democracy is worth fighting for, then teachers need to understand and act like we can play a role in continuing the conversations around what it is, how we should engage with it, and broadly what kind of society we want to live in. Utilizing curriculum within the classroom to discuss and then take informed action, possibly political, with others in our communities, will set a tone and engrain a confidence in young citizens that can carry beyond their time in our care. Teachers that take on this responsibility themselves and work with youth to become democratic in thought and action are what Maxine Greene (1978) calls ‘autonomous people’. They are,

“the ones who manage to be actively attentive to the world around and aware of what

they are choosing when they confront situations in which they can perceive alternative courses of action. They are likely to be guided by the principles accordingly to which they - and those with whom they are involved - have freely chosen to live. I have in mind principles like regard for fairness, respect for others, concern for human integrity. There are many persons who live this way, persons who do not have to decide on each occasion how they ought to behave. This is because they have chosen, at some time and at some level of their beings, to keep their promises, to listen to others' viewpoints, to respond to requests for help, to do their work as decently as they can" (Greene, p.155).

Despite what hegemonic neoliberal discourse will have us believe, schools can be spaces of freedom and emancipation if we design and foster them that way. Democratic schools can act in dialogue with society, and not as training facilities that then launch graduates into it. Circling back to Monbiot, he writes that "a commons, unlike state spending, obliges people to work together, to sustain their resources and decide how the income should be used. It gives community life a clear focus. It depends on democracy in its truest form. It destroys inequality. It provides an incentive to protect the living world. It creates, in sum, a Politics of Belonging" (Monbiot, 2017). Inequality, climate change, reconciliation - globally we face mighty challenges in the years ahead. If we are to be successful in tackling them, we will need to work with our neighbours locally, nationally and internationally - a worldwide effort. I believe that democracy is our best hope of meeting this challenge.

This is why democratic education matters.

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