

Locating Democratic Citizenship in the Classroom: Engaging Canadian Teacher Codes of Ethics in the Quest to Understand What It Means to Teach Democratically

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Abstract: Maxwell and Schwimmer (2016) found that within the Canadian teacher codes of ethics “the values of care and liberal democratic education were the most weakly represented values in the codes whereas the values related to reliability were the most dominant” (p. 477). Approaching the codes with a critical discourse analysis lens (Fairclough, 2003), the author concurs, finding a strong deontological emphasis in 11 of the 13 codes. The analysis of the codes is used as a gateway into the understanding of democratic ways and pedagogies within the classroom. The author proposes a both/and shift whereby “deontological” responsibilities are motivated by an “aspirational” focus (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016), thus moving codes of ethics and teaching/learning landscapes into more ethically democratic spaces. In the both/and context, individuals are valued before ideas untangled.

Keywords: democratic pedagogies, democratic citizenship, ethics, values, epistemology

Introduction

Democracy is lived within a community, within spaces that revolve around “public deliberation and contestation about the common good” (Biesta, 2014, p. 50). Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that Maxwell and Schwimmer (2016) found the Canadian teacher codes of ethics to overemphasize authority while underemphasizing democratic citizenship. They noted, “The values of care and liberal democratic education were the most weakly represented values in the codes whereas the values related to reliability were the most dominant” (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016, p. 477). Reliability, in this context, refers to the teacher’s commitment to educational authorities and the broader public. In their review of the codes, Maxwell and Schwimmer (2016) differentiated between motivation that is “deontological” in nature versus that which is “aspirational.” A deontological approach emphasizes “obedience ... and subordination” (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016, p. 477) whereas an aspirational focus is anchored in values and “ideals” (Banks, 2003, p. 140). The first is duties and rules bound (Banks, 2003; Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016) while the latter initiates from “principles and values” (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016, p. 470). Maxwell and Schwimmer (2016) argued that the codes favour hierarchy of the system over trust in teachers. Thus, they proposed a decentering of extrinsic rules and a move towards intrinsic morals, suggesting a shift towards more “complex ways of seeing, feeling, and responding” (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016, p. 479). In other words, the underlying “why” (Schwimmer & Maxwell, 2017, p. 146) becomes the impetus for action. Being precedes doing.

To be governed by rules without a clear understanding of the underlying moral weakens the value of a code of ethics. A rule without a reason lacks a motivating purpose. Purpose, I contend, is found within the space of a relationship. When others are valued then the aspirational supports the deontological because safety and dignity of self and others is the intent. In such an environment, community, and thus democracy, becomes possible. A context solely driven by the deontological becomes a context of coercion. Fear and power replace a democratic way of being in relation. I suggest that to ignore aspirational values is to inadequately teach democracy and fail to live democratically within the educational landscape.

In the sections that follow, I use the Canadian teacher codes of ethics as a launching pad for the exploration of what it means to live democratically within the classroom and to take up pedagogies that both implicitly and explicitly teach democratic citizenship. I use the codes as my starting point because ethics and democracy are intertwined; democratic living and being within the classroom are shaped by the ethics from which we choose to live. I borrow the language of Maxwell and Schwimmer (2016), approaching the discussion with the belief that the aspirational must shape the deontological in order for democratic living to be sustainable. I begin with a reflexive positioning (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), recognizing “that perceptions of reality ... always involve the projection of self into and onto the world” (Gude, 2009, Modeling Democratic Communities of Discourse section). Using the Canadian teacher codes of ethics as a framework for discussion, I surface examples of deontological language and motivation within the codes, contrasting such an approach with more aspirational ways of being in the classroom. I argue that

only when the aspirational guides the deontological is it possible to create democratic spaces where democratic citizenship can be taken up by all.

A Reflexive Stance

I believe in democracy because of lived experience. I believe in “government by the people” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), in “the absence of hereditary or arbitrary class distinctions or privileges” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), in hard work and its rewards. I believe in creativity and innovation. I believe in a flourishing state, where the freedom to choose and to speak is a basic human right. I believe in the inherent dignity of every individual. I believe that “a truly democratic culture must be composed of many voices” [Boldface in original removed] (Gude, 2009, Forming Voices for Democratic Dialogue section). Because I believe in democracy, I ponder how to live it and teach it.

I want my students to grow into “people [who] develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 83). I want to move beyond mere words. I want not only to tell my students about democracy but to live it, together. I am beginning to understand that this necessitates “creating the conditions through which youth experience the pleasures, anxieties, and responsibilities of democratic life” [Boldface in original removed] (Gude, 2009, Self Aware Citizens of a Democratic Society section). I am seeing more clearly that it is within the space of democratic living that democracy is caught.

The Codes as Backdrop—A Critical Lens

To analyze a text is to understand that one brings to it personal subjectivities, realities, and history (Fairclough, 2003). Challenged by my own beliefs and spurred on by Maxwell and Schwimmer’s (2016) findings, I located an online copy of each of the 13 Canadian teacher codes of ethics, engaging the documents, individually and collectively, with a critical discourse analysis (CDA) lens. The CDA approach allowed me to focus on the semantics of language within the context of relationships (Fairclough, 2003). With a relational focus, CDA is a “problem-oriented explanatory critique [that] inevitably raises questions about power” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 62). My review of the documents was guided by Fairclough’s (2003) organization of textual relationships, where meaning surfaced through the identification of Who engaged in What. As I read and reread the codes, I began to see recurrent themes as well as silent gaps. I was struck by the intersecting positionings of students, educators, and governing body. I observed that relationships unfolded in both loud and quiet ways. My intent was not to label content good or bad. To be clear, there is much in the codes I see as valuable. But I concur with Banks (2003) that “it is important to see codes and their content as part of an evolving and developing tradition, linked to the past of a profession as well as looking to its future” (p. 140). To remain in intentional dialogue with the codes is healthy. This interaction is, in fact, at the very heart of democracy. And it was this democratic wrestling that then led me into an exploratory search of democratic teaching and pedagogies.

In my teasing out of assumptions, I recognize that my analysis is not conclusive. My reflective observations are but one way of looking into and around the codes, with the intention of understanding democratic citizenship and its ways in the classroom.

Intersecting Positionalities

When juxtaposed one against the other, the codes position student as a receiver, teachers as giver, and governing/administrative authorities as trustworthy superiors. Students are benefactors of respect, compassion, safety, and justice. Inherent worth is assumed. Teachers are duty-bound not only to the student but also to the community, profession, association, employer, and colleagues. Verbs used in connection with teachers are most often in the active tense, highlighted by words such as “strive,” “endeavour,” “honour,” “model,” and “cooperate.” Written as obligations, this choice of language suggests a deontological emphasis.

Undergirded by this rules-based perspective, directives in the majority of the Canadian teacher codes of ethics are characterized by a “must and must not do” (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016, p. 479) language. This style speaks to a deontological framework. For example, the Yukon Teachers’ Association (2017), states that “members do not act in a manner harmful or prejudicial to the interests of the Association” (3.4.4). The tone in this and similar statements

resonate with the findings of Maxwell and Schwimmer (2016) who suggested that the deontological emphasis of the majority of codes seems to leave vacant an important aspirational component.

To be clear, the tenets of democratic citizenship, such as “rights and liberties ... obligations” and “universal inclusion” (Altundal & Valelly, 2020, para. 1), are woven implicitly throughout the 13 Canadian teacher codes of ethics. For example, cooperation and respect are emphasized in phrases such as “the member should not make defamatory ... or offensive comments concerning another member” (Nova Scotia Teachers Union, 2019, II.a). Likewise, civic participation is encouraged, as surfaced in the Code of Ethics from the Nunavut Teachers Association (2016) which states that “a member will perform the duties of citizenship” (Member–Public Relationship section, 2). However, in my analysis, I found only two explicit references to the teaching of democracy. One appears in the Prince Edward Island Teachers’ Federation (n.d.) Code of Ethics where it is written that the teacher “shall ... endeavour to inculcate ... an appreciation of the principles of democracy” (7(2)(i)II.3). The second reference is found in the Ontario College of Teachers (2021) Ethical Standards, which states that educators are to “model respect for ... democracy” (Respect section). An additional three codes touched on the educator’s involvement in government office, statements that might be considered as the modeling of democratic responsibility.

Values shape actions. Yet, as highlighted in the above examples, the majority of Canadian teacher codes of ethics seem to take for granted underlying, motivating values, leaving these implied rather than explicit. Understanding that democratic space is fostered when the aspirational motivates the deontological, I believe the nurturing of democratic spaces necessitates a reflection on what we do, why, and how. It is the codes that here provides the starting place for such consideration. The codes act as an entry point, furthering the conversation that surrounds democratic teaching, being, and living. Values imply a standard of ethics. In the remainder of this article, I offer specific democratic pedagogies, gleaned from a synthesis of relevant literature, that offer ways to surface and live the aspirational values that undergird democratic citizenship. Because values, ethics, and actions are tethered one to the other, I begin a discussion of pedagogical practices by considering the role of ethics in the life of the teacher and the classroom.

Democratic Pedagogies in Ethical Spaces

Difference is inherent to the concept of democracy (Biesta, 2011). It is in the space of difference where students are able to grow “the capacity to make connections with others who hold beliefs that vary from their own” (Gude, 2009, Modeling Democratic Communities of Discourse section). Dialogue, in this process, is a given. Its unfolding and the shapes it takes are of utmost importance to democracy’s flourishing. Chan (2006) states, “Sensitivity and tolerance for difference are admirable traits, but they need not be at the expense of the freedom to express differences in opinion without fear that these differences ... be interpreted as racist or discriminatory” (p. 171). Democratic pedagogical practices that encourage innovation and human flourishing emerge from empathic and imaginative attitudes (Gude, 2009). This visionary activity speaks to the value of and necessity for different voices and ways of doing and teaching (Schugurensky & Myers, 2008). From a multiplicity of ideas and contexts will flow “many hybrid forms of citizenship and citizenship education” (Veugelers & de Groot, 2019, p. 19), a fitting compliment to the creativity inherent to democratic freedom. The teacher’s voice and influence, brought into the classroom via explicit language, implicit modeling, and curriculum choices, is inevitable (Bickmore & Kovalchuk, 2012). Democracy is taught through more than words; it is taught through experiential living. Teachers create these spaces (Brubaker, 2012). Beliefs and attitudes undergird our teaching choices; they work in sync with our pedagogies to sustain a democratic classroom.

These values by which we live become our ethics, and ethics spotlight responsibilities. Ethics is defined as “the discipline dealing with ... moral duty and obligation” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), with “the stated aim of guiding ... protecting ... and safeguarding” (Banks, 2003, p. 133). Ethics are bound up in relational interactions, among humankind and between humans and the natural and material world. According to Palmer (1993), “an ethic” is “an approach to living” while “an epistemology” is “an approach to knowing” (p. 51). The two cannot be separated because “our epistemology is quietly transformed into our ethic” (Palmer, 1993, p. 21). Thus, in the pedagogical practices introduced here, I do not distinguish between pedagogies, curriculum, and underlying democratic values. In my understanding, these diffuse into one. This intertwining, then, becomes “a democracy stance” (Vinterek, 2010) in which practices and attitudes are taken up simultaneously as teacher habits.

Mitigating Control

Control has different connotations dependent on purpose and context. Whether referring to physiological state or physical environment, control is an integral piece of democratic citizenship. In the space of democratic living, there exist both “liberties” to be enjoyed and “obligations” to be fulfilled (Altundal & Valelly, 2020, Introduction section). Freire (1970/2000) similarly contended that “there is no freedom without authority, but there is also no authority without freedom” (p. 178). The two work in sync to ensure the safety of all.

This act of balancing authority with freedom must become an integral piece of our teaching environments. Room must be made for both choice and responsibility, privilege and consequence. Biesta (2020) has argued that “the basic gesture of teaching is that of trying to catch and direct the attention of another human being” (p. 2). This speaks to invitation rather than coercion. Similarly, Ruitenberg (2015) has explained that “if ... I conceive of myself as host whose teaching is an unconditional gift, I can open the door and create a space for students to arrive and partake of what I offer without forcing them through the door” (pp. 81–82). The invitational democratic attitude unfolds through the gesture of an open hand.

Yet the democratic posture is not without demands. There exists a give-and-take tension wherein both “individual” and “group” are acknowledged in a space of both “respect” and “negotiation” (Vinterek, 2010, p. 376). It is a carefully choreographed dance where the steps of freedom and boundary, self and other, intersect to create “the aesthetics of education” (Biesta, 2020, p. 2). This is a democratic space where the lives of all are intertwined.

Living Within a Sphere of Hospitality

An ethic of hospitality (Ruitenberg, 2015) suggests a purposeful undoing of defensiveness. The educator intentionally stops to listen, to ask bigger questions that move beyond self, questions that illumine root need (Ruitenberg, 2015). In this space, the Other comes into focus and an attitude of hospitality is lived out through hospitable action (Ruitenberg, 2015). The posture is one in which ways of knowing blend seamlessly and inseparably with “ethical virtue” (Palmer, 1993, p. 74). Beliefs about the value of self and others shape responses. Hospitable classrooms are filled with “tension” and “conflict and compromise” (Brubaker, 2012, p. 12). Democratic spaces understand that “hospitality is not an end in itself. It is offered for the sake of what it can allow, permit, encourage, and yield” (Palmer, 1993, p. 74). Ways of being in hospitable community reflect on the Self and impact the Other.

Hospitality is lived within the inevitable convergence of many worlds. It is on the educational landscape where individual educational histories bump up against those of others while simultaneously sharing spaces with the expectations of system and stakeholder (Brubaker, 2012). This interconnectivity reminds the educator of the reverberating effects of pedagogical and language choices in the present and future lives of students (Williams, 2018). A sensitivity to the impact of one life on another reminds us that “an ethic of hospitality is not an ethic of rights” (Ruitenberg, 2015, p. 137). Rather, hospitality flows from a mindset of service, a democratic attitude that values the worth of another.

Evaluating Assessment Practices

Some assessment practices prove antithetical to democracy, naming as insiders those who possess certain kinds of knowledge and as outsiders those who do not. Assessment practices that value academic pen and paper above the equally needed and complimentary hands-on skills imply a hierarchy of knowledge (Noddings, 2012). Noddings (2012) has warned that “to preserve and enhance our democracy, we must acknowledge our interdependence and teach our young people to appreciate it” (p. 778). Different ways of knowing—the academic and the kinesthetic, the artistic and the analytical—contribute to a flourishing community. Ruitenberg (2015) has similarly argued that the standardization of assessment practices with an input–output, assembly line mentality has directed focus away from the student. In such contexts, the individuality that should be allowed to contribute hospitably to others in community (Palmer, 1993; Ruitenberg, 2015) is too easily suffocated by static assessment practices. What is meant to motivate potentially silences the creative life of democracy. Instead, democratic citizenship pedagogy considers the wholeness of each student and recognizes the gifts every individual brings into the classroom.

When the culture of testing darkens the joy of learning, both student and larger society experience loss. An overemphasis on testing and standardization shifts focus from particular individual and context to impersonal

institution and system. This shift works to “marginalize dissent and diversity, which advantages those at the top of existing hierarchies” (Bickmore & Parker, 2014, p. 292). Such an environment is characterized by “authoritarian” (Brubaker, 2012, p. 13) and “transmission-based teaching” (Brubaker, 2012, p. 12). It suffocates the pedagogical creativity of teachers and the cooperation and collaboration between students (Ferguson–Patrick, 2020). When assessment practices silence individual creativity and community engagement, then a/an re-evaluation of assessment’s purpose must take place (Nodding, 2012).

Appreciating Individual Agency Within Cooperative Community

Democratic citizenship balances individual with group needs. Weaving cooperative learning into the daily rhythms of the classroom is one way to build democratic values and behaviours into the learning process. Through “democratic dialogue,” values such as “trust” and “tolerance and a sense of justice” (Ferguson–Patrick, 2020, p. 11) embed themselves into the fabric of the classroom.

Respecting others whose ideas differ from our own is a learned behaviour (Bickmore & Kovalchuk, 2012). Interactive pedagogies that value difference of opinion open doors to critical engagement, creating spaces where present, past, and personal experience meld with wider context. Participatory in nature, “conflictual dialogue pedagogies assume, require, and at the same time attempt to develop student agency” (Bickmore & Kovalchuk, 2012, p. 591). Cooperation supersedes competition and thoughtful consideration allows for differing views (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). Opinion and reasoning are not lost but rather a healthy push and pull permits voice and drives the democratic process. An attitude of dominance does not annul the democratic way of life, but rather, purposeful dialogical engagement mirrors democratic living. Bickmore and Kovalchuk (2012) argue that “agency is essential to democracy, hence to democratic education” (p. 591). Pedagogies that build agency do so via audience. We speak into the lives of others and they speak into ours (Vinterek, 2010). To encourage agency and build dialogical practices into curriculum choices is to strengthen democratic community.

Democratic spaces survive because of dialogic relations. In these contexts, “talking is as important as listening” (Vinterek, 2010, p. 371). Truth emerges out of tension. Where multiple beliefs and perspectives are given voice, critical thinking matures and informed decision-making results (Vinterek, 2010). Self as integral, participating citizen grows within dynamic democratic relationship.

Creating Intellectually Rigorous, Safe Spaces

Democracy is neither a quiet venture nor a friction-free endeavour. It is an energized space where disagreement is understood as “the spark” (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 37) essential to growth. Conversational pedagogies emerge from relational spaces and move toward personal and communal development (Palmer, 1993). Practiced classroom habits of expression, listening, and respect spill over into wider contexts of home, community, and neighbourhood (Alexander, 2010). Pedagogies that encourage “a free, open, and respectful exchange of ideas” (Campbell, 2008, p. 450) provide for students a visual and visceral experience of what it means to live in democratic ways. In these spaces, “the pupil’s answers and contributions can be explored and built upon rather than merely judged acceptable or unacceptable ... [and] children talk to learn as well as learn to talk” (Alexander, 2010, p. 105). Conversational pedagogies create safe spaces where knowledge and agency develop through purposeful interaction.

Where respectful dialogical spaces exist, “constructive controversy” (Johnson and Johnson, 2009, p. 37) is encouraged. “Skilled disagreement” (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 42) becomes a learned technique. At issue is not the person but an idea. Understanding is enhanced through listening. Dialogue is engaging and challenging, rather than competitive and divisive. Opposing views are acknowledged, while individuals valued. The greatest benefits derive from the greatest participation, where voices neither hide nor dominate. Here, “participants engage in open-minded inquiry characterized by rational argumentation and focused on creating a synthesis that incorporates the best reasoned judgments of everyone involved” (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 43). It is the wrestling that matures democracy’s muscles. It is of value to note that Johnson and Johnson (2009) found that “the value of the controversy process lies not so much in the correctness of an opposing position as in the attention and thought processes it induces” (p. 44). The space of dialogue may be messy but it is within and from this democratic movement that knowledge grows, empathy deepens, and character matures.

Seeing Beyond the Classroom

Democratic citizenship demands a wide-angled gaze; it sees beyond particular subject area or curriculum mandate. Democratic citizenship moves beyond self and into community. Alexander (2010) has noted that “dialogic teaching ... is about how *teachers* as well as children talk, and about pedagogy across the board” (p. 105). Similarly, Noddings (2012) has encouraged educators to “make connections longitudinally within a discipline and laterally across disciplines” (p. 776). Thus are created permeable spaces wherein reality mixes with curriculum. Democratic teaching is anchored in holistic teaching, where curriculum connections are made to student interest, culture, and home. In today’s increasingly globalized world, intersections of language, ethnicity, and belief cannot be avoided, nor, in a democratic society, should they be ignored.

A democratic classroom will naturally face the tension of multiplicity. A culturally relevant pedagogy, suggests Ladson–Billings (2017), is one in which the “goal ... is to develop young people who become multiculturally ... or at least biculturally competent” (p. 88). It is a pedagogy grounded in the belief “that students should be able to use what they learn in school to help solve problems they confront in daily life” (Ladson–Billings, 2017, p. 88). Here, in the interstices between school, community, and home, democratic citizenship education becomes the responsibility of all teachers.

Incumbent on all educators, democratic pedagogies cannot be taught outside the boundaries of relationship. Where respect and safety are prioritized, individual strengths may be recognized (Noddings, 2012) and cultural differences appreciated (Molina–Giron, 2016). Relationships strengthened through democratic ways of knowing move us into the world of curriculum to consider the dynamic workings of what, why, for whom, and with whom (Biesta, 2015). Democracy assumes that we entwine curriculum objectives with our varied selves and our multiple worlds.

Conclusion

To journey into the realm of ethics and democracy is a reminder to live in the space of the both/and. The deontological must be motivated by the aspirational and the aspirational tempered by the deontological. The boundaries may get blurred and the landscape muddled. But this, in fact, is the essence of democracy.

To teach democratically is to move beyond “narration” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 71), understanding students as both receivers and contributors. It is to invite students into their own learning, recognizing that “the most significant forms of civic learning are likely to take place through the processes and practices that make up the everyday lives of children, young people and adults” (Biesta, 2011, pp. 152–153). These ways will, of necessity, take on diverse characteristics for contexts, people, and purpose vary (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Biesta, 2014). To live in the tension is healthy; it is democratic. It keeps us in dialogue, careful to merge our speaking with our listening, “a listening that allows us not only to know the other but to be known from the other’s point of view” (Palmer, 1993, p. 66). In this courageous space, democracy becomes as much about attitude as definition, as much about belief as action. Within the democratic, liberating boundaries of relationship, the value of the individual is established before ideas untangled.

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