Democracy, Education and The Public Space: When Do Students Become Citizens? A Teacher's Reflections on a Political Protest at School

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ABSTRACT: This article describes a funding announcement by the prime minister of Canada at a high school in Winnipeg in February of 1998. The announcement was interrupted by a student protest, one that invoked harsh public criticism. Written from the perspective of a high school social studies teacher of 24 years, and drawing on eminent philosophers of politics and education, the paper discusses several implications for the practice of democracy and the involvement of youth in the public arena. The author concludes that youth involvement in public protest should be seen as an act that preserves democracy and one that serves as citizenship pedagogy. If so, teachers must navigate a pedagogic dilemma at the heart of citizenship education. Given the recent passage of Bill C 55 by the Canadian Parliament and the questions it raised over the role of public dissent, this discussion may be as relevant and necessary today as it was in 1998.

Keywords: teaching practice, experiential learning, citizenship education, democracy education, citizenship pedagogy, critical pedagogy

RESUMÉ: En février 1998 à Winnipeg, le Premier du Canada annonça un financement dans une école secondaire. Les élèves interrompirent l'annonce par une protestation qui fut vivement critiquée par le public. Ecrit du point de vue d'un enseignant en instruction civique depuis vingt ans à l'école secondaire et inspiré d'éminents philosophes en politique et en éducation, l'auteur traite plusieurs répercussions de principes démocratiques et de participation des jeunes dans la sphère publique. Pour finir, il considère que la participation des jeunes dans une protestation publique devrait être vue comme un acte qui

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préserve la démocratie et qui sert de pédagogie civique. S'il en est ainsi, les enseignants doivent gérer un dilemme pédagogique au sein de l'instruction civique. Compte-tenu de l'adoption récente du projet de loi C 55 par le parlement canadien et les questions qui se sont soulevées sur le rôle de la divergence d'opinion, le sujet peut être aussi percutant aujourd'hui qu'il ne le fut en 1998.

Mots-clefs : pratique pédagogique, apprentissage par l'expérience, instruction civique, enseignement de la démocratie, pédagogie civique, pédagogie critique

Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) say that teachers have access to understandings that go beyond what non-practicing educational researchers have produced. Whether true or not, the case is that practitioners' understandings are unique, as they are derived from, and informed by different experiences, interests, and choices - they are embedded in practice. The following is a paper I wrote in 2010, near the end of my 24-year high school teaching career. It was based on a memory of a conversation I had with students from one of the most remarkable social studies classes I taught; and it was written in response to a public protest that three students from that class helped orchestrate in 1998. The paper begins by describing the protest and the harsh negative reaction it received, as chronicled by the *Winnipeg Free Press*. It then argues that the protest represented a genuine and hopeful practice of democratic citizenship, with potentially indispensable pedagogic value. It concludes with a personal response upon discovering, many days after the event, that three of the participants were students' from my class – a discovery that compelled me to confront several critical questions about citizenship education. My intent was not to negate various interpretations of protesters' motivations, but to offer a lens through which to view youthful public protest: as an act that preserves democracy and serves as citizenship pedagogy. Recently, youth involvement in protest movements like Idle-No-More, The Occupy Movement, and Quebec's student tuition protests have invoked similar response from public figures and in the blogosphere – youth portrayed as lazy, self-absorbed, naive, trouble-makers – suggesting that the 2010 paper and its musings may be as relevant today as it was in

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2010, or in 1998. Parliament's passage of Bill C-55 in 2015 and the questions it raises for the role public dissent in Canadian society, provide it with a sense of urgent timeliness.

A Protest at School

On February 14, 1998 the *Winnipeg Free Press* ran a story on its front page about a student protest the previous day at a noon hour student assembly at Grant Park high school. Prime Minister Jean Chretien was in the midst of presenting the school with the 50,000th computer in the national *Computers for Kids Program* when eight students walked up to the stage, sat down quietly, and unfurled placards protesting Canada's recent decision to support the United States in a possible war with Iraq. After the protesters were spirited away from the front of the stage, the Prime Minister took several questions from the audience about the war. He then launched into an energized defense of his government's war policy; the computers were forgotten and the assembly was cut short. (One week previously, Parliament had passed a resolution pledging Canada's military support to the United States in its quest to pressure Iraqi cooperation on UN weapons inspection; in other words, commit Canada to go to war if necessary. The debate was rushed, since the US request had been framed in urgent terms. The resolution was passed after one evening's deliberation in the House of Commons.)

On February 26, 1998 the *Winnipeg Free Press* reported that the leader of the student protest group (a group calling itself *The Alliance for Peace*) had been 'dressed down' by the Prime Minister, the RCMP were investigating him, the school principal was suspending him for two days, and the chairman of the Winnipeg School Division supported the idea of 'disciplining' him. The *Free Press* also reported that the Minister of Education for the province of Manitoba had sent a letter to the school division demanding an investigation, and that "Millar be given a punishment severe enough that it will serve as an example to others that good citizenship, basic courtesy, and the safety of others are expected in our schools" ("Peace protest upstages Chretien: Questions about Iraq besiege PM at school", 1998).

This student protest and the public response it received raise critical issues about the purposes of education, the practice of

citizenship, and the meaning of democracy. I have two objectives in writing this paper. First, drawing on the ideas of eminent philosophers of politics and education who have written about the public space in liberal democracies, I want to make the case that the protest represented a critical practice of democratic citizenship, served as an essential means of citizenship education, and signaled a hopeful counter-narrative to bleak prognostications about the civic engagement of young people. Second, drawing on my personal response to the protest, one informed by 24 years of teaching high school social studies and humbled by the poignant moment when I discovered that three of the protesters were students in my World Issues class, I want to explore the implications for teaching youth about democratic engagement and for involvement in the public space.

A Practice of Citizenship

As cited earlier, immediately following the events of February 13th, the Minister of Education called for punishment of Chris Millar severe enough to teach him and all students the real meaning of 'good' citizenship. Presumably she considered the actions of his group anathema to citizenship. But were they really? What is good citizenship? According to Hannah Arendt and Maxime Greene, citizenship rests at the heart of public life. Arendt conceives the public space as people coming together in speech and action, and bringing into existence an 'in-between' among themselves. Greene (1996) elaborates further:

> A public begins to come into existence when various people begin paying head to the consequences of certain private transactions – consequences that affect the lives of people outside the sphere of those transactions . . . when there is reflection on those events, when groups of persons begin to appreciate and to care about what is happening, then they are likely to open a public space in which demands on representatives can be made and people begin to find voices and to express what they think and feel. (p. 28)

Greene implies that a public space is based on people acting on impulses or motivations other than self-interest, suggesting a frame of mind that includes or imagines other's perspective and experience, something the ancient Stoics called 'a vivid

imagination of the different.' Arendt and others contend that this way of thinking and behaving is critical to, and the moral and rational requisite for, citizenship. Furthermore, Seyla Benhabib (1996a) says, citizenship implies not just an ability to exercise an enlarged mentality but to participate actively and with courage, virtue and independent political action.

Based on these conceptions of citizenship action in the public space, it can be argued that the protesting students were thinking and behaving as 'good' citizens. They were motivated out of care for others – Canadians and Iraqis – and they worried over the implications of their government's decision on international issues of war and peace and on the lives and wellbeing of themselves and others. They believed that the recent decision to support a war had been undemocratic; and discussion of this issue was more urgent than a celebration over the government's computer initiative. They expressed their concern, independently and publicly to their country's leading political representative, in the hopes of influencing his government's decision. They listened to him when he responded; and it was front-page news the next day, thus becoming a part of a broader public discussion. A space had been created where people came together in speech and action, and an 'in-between', as Arendt called it, among themselves had been established. By doing so, acting as citizens, the students also necessarily vitalized the public space. Hearkening Benhabib (1996a):

> In today's global world, the public sphere has a crucial role . . . the ability of individuals and groups to take the standpoint of others into account, to reverse perspectives and see the world from their point of view, is a crucial virtue in a civic polity, certainly one that becomes most necessary and most fragile under conditions of cultural diversity and social opacity. The public sphere is like the pupil in the eye of the body politic; when its vision is murky, cloudy, or hindered, the sense of direction of the polity is also impaired. (p. 210-211)

An Exercise of Democracy

Much of commentary in the *Winnipeg Free Press* following the events of February 13th was negative. The protesters were derided by public officials, education leaders, and security

personnel (Nairne, 1998). It was suggested that the protesting students had no right to interfere with the planned public event, an event where the organizers and participants (the Prime Minister, the school, the Province) had no intention of having a public discussion on an impending war. The event was organized to celebrate and note a significant government undertaking. By behaving the way they did, the students were being ‘uncivil’, obstructing a peaceful assembly, and a threat to democracy.

The issue is a difficult one, certainly. But the nature of the parliamentary decision the week before and the imperatives of democracy were such that the intervention/protest can be interpreted as a legitimate and necessary form of democratic engagement. According to Charles Taylor (1995) for democracy to exist,

> The mass of people should have some say in what they are going to be, and not just told what they are; that this say should be genuinely theirs, and not manipulated by propaganda, misinformation, irrational fears; and that it should to some extent reflect their considered opinions and aspirations, as against ill-informed and knee-jerk prejudices. (p. 273)

Jurgen Habermas (1992) observes the antithesis in the West, where he sees a serious decline and weakening of democracy: a public sphere that is becoming an arena for advertising, not critical debate, demanding conformity, not common interests, and legislatures preoccupied with staged displays aimed at persuading rather than engaging in critical debate among its members.

To save democracy, Habermas (1992, 96) calls for a discourse-centred deliberative method to political decision-making. It is an approach that views the exchange of arguments and counter-arguments as the most suitable procedure for formation of opinion and will, resolving moral-practical questions, and the basis for deliberative democratic decision-making. It involves the complete inclusion of all parties; and the process must be permeable to the ideas, values, topics, and variations from the surrounding political communication. The goal, Habermas (1992) says, is to “bridge the gap between enlightened self-interest and orientation to the common good, between the roles of client and citizen” (p. 449). Benhabib (1996a) identifies the necessary features of this type of approach: (Italics are mine.)

> Participation in such deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate, and to open debate; 2.) A*ll have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation*; and 3.) All have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out. (p. 70)

Benhabib (1996b) argues that this type of discourse-centred deliberative democratic approach must be central to any theory of democratic legitimacy that holds that "the government is essentially for the people, through the people, and by the people" (p. 201). Democratic legitimacy, Benhabib (1996a) says, results from the "free and unconstrained public deliberation of all about matters of common concern" (p. 68). Both Benhabib (1996a) and Habermas (1992, 96) see this type of method as the only viable means to seek and achieve a common or universal interest in the public sphere - or as Arendt (1968) would say, a common world.

Viewed through the conceptions of Habermas and Benhabib, the action of the students serves a necessary and vital democratic function. The debate in the House of Commons had been rushed; the resolution passed after one evening's deliberation. No time was given to seeking the meaningful consent of the nation's people. The students were reminding government of their democratic responsibilities.

At the noon hour assembly what the government and its representatives were expecting to do was what Habermas calls "stage a display aimed at persuading rather than engaging in critical debate" (Calhoun 1992, p.25), to present the audience with a gift and to publicize an achievement. The students ostensibly said,

> Hang-on, this other thing our government is doing more important; we want to talk about that. It will affect Canada, Canadians, our families; it is more important to us and to our public concerns than your announcement; we want to challenge you on this.

What the students were seeking to express was their opinion on Canada going to war, the seriousness of the decision (one of the

placards read: “Going to war is not a computer game”), and the need for the government to hear from its citizens.

When the students walked to the front of the room, they, and others in the audience, ceased being objects of communication and became participants in a public conversation. Benhabib (1996a) sees this as the critical difference between the ‘masses’ and the ‘public’ – and one that necessarily differentiates the political status quo and deliberative democracy. The students initiated a ‘speech act’, ‘questioned the assigned topics of conversation’, and challenged political hegemony. Sometimes democratic participation is unruly and entails a necessary messiness. The powers that be that day were embarrassed: the RCMP security detail (whose job it was to prevent these things from happening), the principal (who was hoping for a smoothly functioning assembly), the Minister of Education, (who was showcasing her province), and the Prime Minister (who was bequeathing a gift). Everyone in the audience, including the students, was expected to behave and not change the conversation. However, as Benhabib (1992) observes, when talking about the modern struggles of social justice groups (the women’s movement, the peace movement, and ecology movements), they always begin with demanding public attention. Public dialogue he says “means challenging and redefining the collective good” (p. 100). In short, democracies must be open to citizens changing the conversation; it is a duty and responsibility of its citizens to do so.

A Lesson in Hopefulness

In 1958 Hannah Arendt wrote that society was experiencing the eclipse of the public realm of participatory politics and the emergence of an atomized society. Thirty-seven years later, in 1995, Charles Taylor observed the same. He attributed it to a growing sense of citizen powerlessness and alienation in the face of “large, centralized, bureaucratic societies” (p. 278). The student protest serves as a heartening response to these bleak judgments, an example of participatory politics and an antidote to citizen alienation - even if it was unfairly disruptive. But it does more. According to political philosophers like Habermas (1992), democratic action and thought is grounded in free, open, broad and egalitarian communication and participation. It was young people -

so often berated for their social and political cynicism and apathy - who demonstrated faith in democracy and took their responsibilities of citizenship seriously. Sadly it was the elders, the public officials who were present, who did not.

Questions of Pedagogy

If the student protest was a legitimate exercise of civic engagement, the question is raised, what about the role of education and of the responsibility of schools and of teachers in this matter? Did the action have pedagogical merit, and if so, how? Did these high school students even belong in this public space in the first place, in this political role? Arendt would have said no – for two reasons: to protect children from the world, and to save the world from children. She worried about the contaminating effects of politics on schools and education and of teacher not taking responsibility for saving the world. In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt argued for a clear separation between the public political space and education. She believed that young people should not participate in the public sphere until after college graduation. However, many scholars, while acknowledging schools' unique responsibilities vis-a-vis the public sphere, have challenged Arendt's stance.

For example, Maxime Greene (1995) believed that democratic public spaces, in the tradition of Arendt and Dewey, should be created by teachers in classrooms - spaces that not only mirror the world but are the world. Opening these spaces, through students telling and writing their stories, hearing others', and having "all kinds of persons appear before one another articulating the nature of their searches" (p. 41), would lead to the emergence of a common public and democratic community, one that would help students develop firm and reflexive identities.

Others, like Davies (2005) and Sinclair (2008) contend that students can only learn democracy and acquire a sense of empowered citizenship by living and practicing it in schools and classrooms. Their research in English and American high schools found that the more young people were involved in democratic processes in schools, the more civically engaged they became outside of school – underscoring Dewey's (1916) assertion that schools should not view their role so much as *preparing* students

for life and democracy, but being places where life and democracy are *lived*.

But what about outside of school; if citizenship selves are most effectively developed, and the practice of citizenship best learned, through authentic engagements in the real world, wouldn't the place for real world engagement be where citizenship is realized, in the public space of democratic societies? If so, how? At what point are young people prepared to act as bona fide citizens, and what is the responsibility of education – of schools and teachers in this regard?

A Personal Response

I have been a high school social studies teacher for over 24 years, teaching in a school on a university campus where students often participate in political events on campus. I have often had to consider, and engage my 16 and 17-year-old students with discussions on issues of political participation and citizenship responsibility. However, there was one conversation in particular that, more than any other, affected how I understand the questions posited above.

Many years ago, in the winter of 1998, several students approached me and confessed to participating in a recent public protest, asking for advice. The protest had taken place at a neighbouring high school, at a noon hour assembly, where the Prime Minister of Canada had presented the school with the 50,000th computer in the national *Computers for Kids Program*. They were now afraid of being investigated by the RCMP, being 'outed' to the Minister of Education, and being blacklisted by local business and educational authorities. I was not surprised; this was not the first time these students had participated publicly in the cause of social or political justice, and always at some personal cost. In the past, their actions had not been so public; no one in class or the school knew about their activities. They wanted to keep it that way.

In my years of teaching, I had rarely seen a group of students so unambiguously committed to social justice, and so willing to take action. They acted independently and of their own volition. I admired their clarity of purpose, sensitivity to injustice, and their non-violent and creative approaches. I respected their apparent

lack of ego; they seemed to be motivated solely by their ideals, and not by any attention-seeking motives. There were times that year when I felt a sense of shame in not sharing the same sense of urgency and social responsibility, wondering why there were not more of us adults participating like this, publicly – but also thinking that perhaps we, young and old, have different educative responsibilities: I am playing my role by helping facilitate my students' sense of agency in the world; and they are playing theirs by reminding me of the possibilities of citizenship.

In my view, these students were doing what their civics education was preparing them for: paying attention, finding voice, and participating. And yet the adults that represented the political and educational system reacted with fear, disdain and outrage. Based on their comments in the media, they believed that the students were being selfish, reckless, and impulsive. But were they? I have learned in 24 years of teaching that young people are more sophisticated than they are often portrayed – in their motivations and worldview, in their ethical sensitivities and sensibilities. Youth often bring a unique and necessary perspective to public discussion and action, as has been demonstrated globally by their being in the vanguard of social justice, environmental and peace movements. Of course, young people do not always behave with willful altruism in public, and sometimes act from motivations of self-interest, promotion or aggrandizement (not unlike adult politicians); but not this group. (I often wonder whether it was student protests, like this one in 1998, that helped inspire Mr. Chretien to stand up to US president George W. Bush in the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003.)

Charles Taylor (1995) says one of the most common failures of democratic processes is a sense of powerlessness and alienation of citizens, and an atomization of society. When this happens, a feeling of common purpose evaporates, as does a sense of engaged citizenry. In my experience, one of the impediments to motivating youth for participation in the public space is sense of cynicism and powerlessness: "What difference can I really make and why should I care?" Taylor's remedy to political fragmentation and powerlessness is to make sure all groups are heard, to meaningfully engage and empower people, and for people to participate in common action, and to relax the boundaries between the political system and the public sphere. If this holds true for

adults, it should hold true for youth. If we adults in school talk about the importance of preserving democracy and of participating as citizens in society, and our students take us seriously and endeavour to do so, how can we say, "sorry not outside the classroom?" Do we not risk alienating them by replicating the very conditions that Taylor says leads to citizenship alienation in the first place? Should that not be a purpose of education, to help introduce students to the public space through real and actual participation, one that welcomes their voice, embraces their involvement and demonstrates an egalitarian ethic?

For the reasons implied in the questions above, youth involvement in the public space can be pedagogically efficacious and democratically desirable. It can serve as an invaluable means of citizenship education, particularly if students are given opportunities to reflect on and think about past and current public experience and action – not unlike Paulo Freire's (2007) pedagogy of *praxis*. It also enhances democracy – by giving voice to youth, and by engaging their meaningful and future participation. In the case of the protesting students, for example, because they acted out of concern for an important public issue and because they took the public space seriously, they ended up re-creating a public space. They animated broader public participation and motivated the media to disseminate information of public concern. Democracy was actualized and the public space enlivened.

A Concluding and Ongoing Challenge

Using *The Alliance for Peace* protest as exemplar, I have argued that practicing democracy outside of school, in the world, can be integral to citizenship education and to enriching the public space. But does this hold true for all occasions when high school students engage in public actions, seeking to challenge 'the assigned topics of conversation,' and demanding attention on matters of public concern? It is a question that speaks to a dilemma at the heart civics education. Arendt (1968) said, education

> is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable . . .(p.

> 196) Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look. (p. 192)

So the dilemma is this, and it is timeless: How do educators at once preserve the world and allow for the new, and how do they find the wisdom to know when to protect and when to let go – when to say yes, when to say no. For as John Dewey (1997) reminds, freedom is a pre-requisite for students to get to know themselves and their relationship to the world, "however, it is part of the educator's responsibility to see that the problems encountered . . . are within the range of the capacity of students" (p. 79). Knowledge of where that range exists is probably unique to each relationship dynamic: the teacher, the student, and the occasion. However it is critical to know that young people are capable of much, often far beyond what we can see and what guardians of the public space can imagine – as *The Alliance for Peace* showed.

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