

# **EDITORIAL**

## *Democracy and Education*

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The 21<sup>st</sup> century has already been a terrible century with war and slaughter marking it. If the last century was about the destruction of empires by envious nations this century has begun in a somewhat similar manner. We have just finished a mercifully quick, but nonetheless destructive war by a “coalition of the willing” led by the United States which is fighting a universal global “war on terrorism.” It is perhaps also fighting a global war against those who deny it oil necessary for its way of life. The opposition was led by envious nations with an equal need for oil or the trade that goes with it. These nations include France, Germany, and Russia as well as Canada.

So far this century we have had a war in Afghanistan to clear out the Taliban and Al Qaeda, mopping up operations which are ongoing in what was once Yugoslavia and Iraq. And presently nearly everybody is trying to ignore the mass slaughter going on in the Congo where one group of tribesmen with heavy weapons are slaughtering another. The result of all of these and similar wars is the imposition of forms of democracy upon the warring nations, peoples, or countries as a condition for their economic and cultural survival. Thus the 21<sup>st</sup> century is marked by a rapid but forced development of multi-party democracy and rebuilding efforts which begin with new forms of education. Usually these developments are sponsored by the United Nations, although sometimes they are sponsored, as in Iraq, by a few powers with the expectation that the United Nations will ultimately play a role.

What relation does democracy bear to education or education to democracy in our time? In Canada and the United States, in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, the Scandinavian countries, and the Netherlands, to name a few, the manner of organizing the school experience is very similar. The theoretical and practical educators of all these countries write for and read each other in the various international educational journals, of which for example, this journal is one. They visit one another’s countries and one another’s schools. Most

countries with publicly funded school systems support some form of democratic regime and presuppose that the school system aids and abets them in this endeavour. Some countries, of course, of which many Arab countries are prime examples, do not support democracy but rather a form of theocracy with a privileged interpretation of holy writ. And one great country, China, assimilates democracy to the continuing power and influence of the Communist Party. Usually such regimes are run by a dictatorship or by a royal family with absolute power. But, with these exceptions, democracy and education are strongly linked in our time. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern Block neighbours, one would have been tempted to think as C.B. MacPhearson did of "the real world of democracy" as including those who used democracy to describe their autocratic or dictatorial regimes supposed to be governing on behalf of some privileged class or group, usually the "proletarians."

The century just past offered a number of thinkers on educational matters determined to encourage liberal democratic sentiments in the next generation of which John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, and A.S. Neill stand out. All three were developers of experimental schools, Dewey at Chicago, Russell at Beacon Hill, and Neill at Summerhill, although only the latter two actually worked intimately with their schools. In Russell's case students could vote on various matters relating to the school, but attendance at classes was compulsory as was obedience to the teachers, liberal though they were. For A.S. Neill democracy ruled nearly everything in the school. All decisions relating to school policy were made by the democratic vote of the students in Summerhill. Dewey has written a book entitled *Democracy and Education*. Russell has written numerous books on education including *Education and the Social Order*. A.S. Neill wrote many versions of *Summerhill* including a book of that name and *A Dominie's Log*.

Have any of these works had direct influence on public educational arrangements in our own time? Empirically speaking I suppose nobody knows. We can say with great certainty that most schools, most times, nearly everywhere are not democratic places as A.S. Neill would have them be. Children do not come and go as they wish. Children do not vote on nearly every aspect of the running of the school. Children do not attend classes voluntarily. In fact, it would probably not be too much to claim that most schools, most of the time, are clearly run by the Principal or Head Master and the teachers and that a child, once inside a particular teacher's classroom, is at his or her mercy. Perhaps in mass

school systems this is necessary. But so far as I know nobody has ever attempted a Neill like experiment on an entire school system.

Perhaps, however, the essence of democracy is not merely being able to vote on matters of interest and importance to the governed, as school children are. Perhaps it resides in some other notion or notions. One that comes to mind is that in a democracy the real difficulty is managing peaceful regime change. For example, although the Soviet Union characterized itself as democratic, as did the governments of its various satellites, and voting was encouraged at periodic intervals for the election of officials to various city, or state, or national government posts, nonetheless the outcomes of such elections were already known and there were never any opposition parties in the running.

Now our schools are unlikely testing grounds for peaceful regime change. We do not vote as to who will be our teacher this year or next. Nor do we vote as to who will be the principal. These are always irrevocable decisions made by others higher up an educational hierarchy. Indeed, teachers do not get to elect their own principal or head masters. There is usually not even a ratification vote. Some universities, like Simon Fraser and the University of British Columbia, do have ratification votes for the deans selected by a selection committee, the committee being elected by the various faculty councils in advance. But such practices are very unusual and certainly not the norm. As a rule a public educational system has no such selection or ratification procedures. Yet it is such systems that think of themselves as encouraging democracy.

When I think of my own “democratic” experiences in the school system of the province of Canada where I was raised I can think of only one vote taken in 12 years of school. In the sixth grade we held a mock trial of a student who had apparently committed the dastardly educational crime of spelling “I” with a lower case “i,” something that the use of word processors is bringing back for those who do not know how to use the shift keys. As it happened I was the counsel for the defense and argued that as the student was using a ballpoint pen, only that year made permissible in our schools for the first time, and as such pens often skipped, his lower case “was really a written capital ‘T’ produced by a skipping pen.” The prosecuting counsel denied this. But the decision was made by a vote of the entire class and as it happened the student with the supposed skipping pen was voted to be “not guilty.” This is a pretty limited example of student democracy in action. But my sense is that

this is the sort of thing which passes for democracy in our democratic schools.

It is possible, of course, that adulthood and voting for party candidates, or in referenda on a multitude of matters, are only appreciated in the context of an educational system which demonstrates what an oppressive, dictatorial regime is all about. If that is the case then perhaps there is some chance that democracy will flourish in the various parts of the former Soviet Union, of the former Yugoslavia, and all over the Middle East. But for the school children it is a long time to wait from the collapse of a dictatorial political regime to the end of a dictatorial school regime before one can vote on such matters as the removal of a present government and its replacement by another.

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