

Democratic education to address social inequalities

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Introduction

I had the opportunity over the last month to observe the culture and educational system at James Lyng High School in the St. Henri neighbourhood of Montreal. James Lyng serves the poorest student community in the English Montreal School Board—54% of its students live below the poverty line—and despite the great efforts it makes to support its students, barely half leave with a diploma, and even those that do have limited post-secondary or employment options. For most James Lyng students, their parents' disadvantages will pass into their generation despite the best efforts of the school.

In this paper, I will sketch an outline of my tentative philosophy for a system of state-provided formal education that addresses the issues facing schools like James Lyng across Canada. My philosophy is grounded in the realities of our democratic society and attempts to be realistic, if somewhat idealistic. I discuss schooling rather than broader education for the reason that Harry Brighouse expresses in Chapter One of *On Education*: the societal debate about education focuses on schooling. I will then consider a few issues as case studies of how this philosophy responds to current educational debates.

The philosophical foundation

My basic conception of the justification for state-provided formal education closely follows Amy Gutmann's notion of democratic education (pg. 159). Briefly put, the democratic society exists to maximize the collective flourishing of its citizens by providing the conditions for its citizens to flourish in. Truly democratic governance implies the active participation of all citizens, which requires that those citizens have *democratic agency*. The basic role of formal education, then, is to create the conditions in each citizen sufficient for the democratic society to reproduce and improve itself, so that it can continue to provide the conditions for its new citizens to flourish in. As John Dewey (pg. 48) warns us, without sufficient education for all, the educated and the undereducated lose their common concerns and the

ability to both participate in the democratic process, leading to class stratification and ultimately a breakdown in the underpinnings of the democratic society.

There are four common curricular elements I posit are required to achieve democratic agency in our society: knowledge about the world, a skill set for economic agency, a skill set for autonomy and a sense of citizenship.

To establishing the importance of knowledge, Shaikh et al. (pg. 87) make a useful comparison of a society to technology. One cannot really change or improve a technology without first knowing how it works; in the same way, knowledge about the way a society works is a prerequisite for being able to participate and effect change. This is more and more true of our complex society, where even our food is produced by mechanisms hidden to us. Our education system is not ensuring our students have enough knowledge about the workings of the world; as one of the teachers at James Lyng shared with me, her students often have very misguided ideas and expectations about life.

I also argue that economic and democratic agency are bound enough together in our society that those who are economically disenfranchised are democratically disenfranchised. Building on Dewey's conclusion (pg 89-94) that economic participation must be valuable in a society, I reach a similar conclusion as Brighthouse in Chapter two, though from a different vantage point: students must be educated to have a wide range of economically valuable skills in order to have economic agency. This encompasses economic mobility rather than just specific job training since our economy changes quickly; a full participant today with a narrow skill-set could be unemployed tomorrow. This change is a desired feature of our society, so we must give our citizens the mobility to ensure their economic agency in the future as well as now.

I am not arguing, however, for students to be filled up like a bank account with knowledge and employment skills and set out into the world. Under that conception of education—the banking-model

described by Freire (pg. 68-75)—the group whose knowledge and skills are being taught has the agency with which it oppresses other groups. Instead, following on Freire and on more recent educational psychology research (Ormrod et al., pg. 16-32), I am arguing that the students must be involved as agents in their education. To discuss how to achieve this in depth is beyond the scope of this essay, though I will comment that newer psychological and pedagogical research indicates avenues to pursue, such as inquiry-based learning (Ormrod et al.).

Whichever pedagogical approach we take must encourage both personal autonomy and a sense of citizenship. To promote the facilitation of autonomy, Brighthouse (Chapter 1) proscribes logical reasoning and analysis, exposure to diverse people, and grounding in diverse philosophies with exposure to serious advocacy of several. I would sum these up by saying that one needs the tools to look at one's own life, culture and society from the outside in order to make meaningfully autonomous judgements. For me, it was only after my formal education when I had the chance to live abroad that I was able to look at my own society from the outside; however, with a diverse school, the assistance of technology (discussed below) and programs such as student exchanges, this is also possible within the school system.

The last element of democratic agency is a sense of citizenship, which I would characterize as socialization into a way of acting and being consistent with a democratic society. This entails a commitment to argue reasonably in public—what Brighthouse labels the “norm of reciprocity” (Chapter 4)—since factions that find each other's arguments unreasonable cannot work together democratically to improve society. It also requires a disposition to engage in society in productive ways, both through one's actions, such as working, and one's affective engagement, such as empathy. This is more difficult to defend as agency is generally considered a rational quality; however, I would argue that agency also has a motivational aspect which requires a sense of citizenship.

What about educating for individual flourishing, as Brighthouse argues for in Chapters One and Three? I do not see this as following from the basic necessity of education in a democratic society; however, democratic agency allows every citizen the opportunity to participate fully in their society and to effect change in such a way that promotes their flourishing. In effect, I am defending a notion of education that aims for a collective rather than individual notion of flourishing.

Situation within the QEP

The core of the current Quebec Educational Program is each student's creation of a "world-view, identity and empowerment". This corresponds well to my model of democratic participation: to participate in the democracy is indeed to be empowered to act with the skills and knowledge (i.e. the world-view) required to act responsibly and effectively.

Further details of the QEP also correspond, though not exactly, with my philosophy. Secondary schools have a threefold mission: "to provide instruction in a knowledge-based world," "to provide qualifications in a changing world," and "to socialize students in a pluralistic world" (pg. 5), which respectively cover my first, second and fourth curricular elements: knowledge, economic agency, and citizenship. The emphasis in the QEP, as in my philosophy, is on success for all at meeting a certain threshold: "Standards will be high, because the aim is to prepare students for active integration into a complex world, but flexible enough to recognize that there are many different ways to take one's place in the world" (Québec, pg. 8).

I offer some ideas below on how my philosophy would change the status quo. It is important to realize that the QEP's vision of education is not fully realized in the status quo, both because the latest reform will take time to be fully implemented and because the resources allocated are often not sufficient to fully reach its goals. Often, my recommended changes agree with the vision of the QEP.

Distribution of educational resources

I have so far discussed what manner of education we must provide to all citizens for the purposes of reproducing and improving our democracy. The conclusion that the state must provide such resources to all its citizens regardless of status suggests an educational threshold, at the level of education necessary for all citizens to participate adequately in the democracy, and below which state resources must be distributed by a principle of humane justice (as defined in Jencks, pg. 248-249) in order to ensure everyone meets the threshold. Amy Gutmann (pg. 240) calls this the *democratic threshold*.

I should note that there is a similar threshold in the status quo, but it is too low. My evidence for this comes from observational experience at James Lyng: the youth of that community are not being adequately prepared for full democratic participation. They are alienated from our societal institutions and deliberations, and are either discouraged and repressed or, frustrated, turn to socially illegitimate forms of discourse such as graffiti. They are also not well prepared for economic participation: even when graduating, most have few job prospects and their fields of potential employment are often in danger of being lost to technology. Educational research suggests several routes to increasing student achievement (granted, this is usually measured on traditional academic scales) which can be achieved by putting more resources into schools: more instructional time, more teacher feedback from administration, and frequent tutoring in small groups, for example (Dobbie & Fryer, pg. 2; Parkay et al., pg. 168). My philosophy demands that these are piloted and implemented in schools where they are necessary, with resources diverted from expenditures not necessary for helping citizens achieve the democratic threshold.

What about education above the threshold? I take Gutmann's view (pg. 240) that once the state (or a state actor) has allocated enough resources to ensure all its citizens meet the democratic

threshold, it may use education to address other societal interests. It is worth noting that the argument for distributing resources according to humane justice does not hold above the educational threshold; indeed the only criterion for distribution is a democratic decision-making process. To illustrate, I give some examples of “above-threshold” educational aims that I see as desirable in our society:

- The state should fund health education distributed according to humane justice. Public health is a significant societal interest which is often better served with prevention rather than cure.
- To continue innovation and knowledge-development in society the state should subsidize, if not fund completely, a meritocratic system of higher education.
- A teacher who has fulfilled her duties associated with facilitating students’ democratic agency may decide to enrich her school by coaching a volleyball team, offered to students based on interest.

Good teachers

The discussion above may give the impression that the only remedy needed is a redistribution of financial resources. This is not true; educational research over the past forty years has established several characteristics which are correlated with higher student achievement (again, measured on academics) that cannot be readily addressed by increasing the input of resources (Parkay et al., pg. 168). One of these factors that may make the most difference is quality of teaching.

Educational research gives principles and best practices for effective teaching based on our knowledge about learners and the educational environment (Ormrod et al.), which points us in the direction of certain teacher competencies such as professional reflection (Grant & Zeichner, pg. 1-18), attentiveness to students’ intellectual and social development (Hansen, pg 351), and subject-specific knowledge (Ormrod et al., pg. 8). On top of the necessary competencies, Nel Noddings makes a convincing argument (pg. 372-376) that caring wholeheartedly for one’s students is a key part of teaching, and I would go further to say that great teachers really must care about their job—i.e. that

teaching is a vocation to which people are called, as argued by the Royal Bank (pg. 12). The sense of caring and vocational calling is, if not necessary, then almost necessary to devote oneself to developing the cultivated ability necessary to teach well to each unique student.

However, it has to be acknowledged that two different teachers can exemplify the above and yet be very different in teaching “style”; indeed, as no two teachers are exactly alike in personal disposition or ability, often the effectiveness of a teacher is greatest if they find a style of teaching which works for them as well as their students (Grant & Zeichner, pg. 1-18).

While we obviously cannot obtain an objective ranking of teachers, we must still acknowledge that differences in teaching quality exist, and that good teachers are an educational resource. Given that schools like James Lyng already have many resources to support students and are still failing, my philosophy strongly suggests that we need to identify the best teachers and incentivize them to teach in these schools.

Technology in education

We should also consider the impact—positive or negative—that technology may have on education. I argue that technology can have a positive and potentially revolutionary effect on education since it offers individualized education on a scale previously impossible. Computers can provide instructional material to students in a variety of formats—text, video, games, problem sets, and so on—for students to use at their own pace and in their own manner. If done properly, this could be a vehicle for empowering students as agents in their education.

As well, educational technology could provide a teacher with personalized data on the progress of each student, so the teacher can pinpoint their exact points of confusion and help students more effectively. An example of this is the Khan Academy (www.khanacademy.org), a website which provides

thousands of educational videos as well as software that gives “coaches” data on how their students are progressing on a set course. Dobbie and Fryer recently identified data-driven teaching such as this as an effective way of improving student performance.

Of course, technology has its limits. Since students often learn best when they socially construct their knowledge with a peer group mediated by a more advanced learner (Ormrod et al., pg. 160-161), there is no equivalent replacement to socialization among real people. Dreyfus warns us of this in regard to the internet (pg. 1-10), which he decries on the basis that it removes us from the ability to make the unconditional commitments that we find in the real world.

Since Dreyfus’s writing in 2002, however, the internet has changed fundamentally from an information source into a means of connection between people. Social networks, for example, when used properly complement our human relationships rather than distancing us from each other. The same can be true for educational technology. Brighthouse in Chapter One argues that educational systems should encourage diversity within their schools; however this is not always possible due to local cultural homogeneity. Videoconferencing with students from another school with a very different cultural background, for example, could present some of the same benefits.

Conclusion

I began this essay by reflecting on my time at James Lyng, hoping to develop a coherent educational philosophy applicable to the real-world problems faced by schools like Lyng and defensible in a democratic system of government. Though there are certainly weak points to my argument, I think I achieved these goals.

What I am not yet certain of is whether it can work. As society innovates and expands its knowledge, the educational gains made by those pursuing higher education will tend to increase

inequality in the society, thus necessitating a rising democratic threshold as more capability is needed to participate in the democracy (Green, pg. 230-235; Gutmann, pg. 240-241). We can easily see this is true by reflecting that a college degree today is what a high school diploma was decades ago. Can a system which tolerates such pressures toward inequality, as our democracy does, truly create a society where everyone has economic and social mobility?

My sense is that it is possible, for two reasons. The first is that there are other social mechanisms such as progressive taxes and school bursaries which can help control inequality. The second is that three factors have come together in our society: the public acceptance of an educational philosophy dedicated to improving and not just replicating society (e.g. the QEP), the beginnings of a scientific understanding of the factors that make up effective schools and good learning situations, and the technology to enable us to personalize and re-humanize education. The potential of an educational system that successfully combines these three trends is huge.

If we can achieve this through education, the cycle of improving educational standards that will result will be very desirable. In the words of John Dewey the democratic society “has the ideal of such change as will improve it” (pg. 48); education should be a motor of this change.

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