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Matt Brillinger

In his 2015 book What Kind of Citizen?, Educating our Children for the Common Good, Joel Westheimer discusses three ways educators answer the question, “What kind of citizen do we need to support an effective democratic society?” (p 38).

As Westheimer explains, educators generally define good citizenship in one of three ways, advocating that schools produce either “personally responsible citizens” (citizens who act responsibly); “participatory citizens” (citizens who are active members of community organizations); or “social justice–oriented citizens” (citizens who critically assess social, political and economic structures).

Writing a century before Westheimer, educational theorist John Dewey offered another vision of good citizenship, arguing in his 1916 book Democracy and Education that “since democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another” (Westheimer, 1969).

What Dewey gets at here is the notion that education for an effective democratic society must be directed, above all else, at building bridges between a student’s many experiences, the goal being to produce citizens who are able to draw on skills and insights acquired in one setting to successfully navigate another setting.

Dewey encouraged teachers to forge connections between a student’s home life and school life, criticizing the educators of his day for creating, within schools, a set of unnatural experiences utterly unlike the experiences students find outside of school.

“The physical equipment and arrangements of the average schoolroom are hostile to the existence of real situations of experience,” Dewey writes, adding, “It is hardly possible to overstate the contrast between such conditions and the situations of active contact with things and persons in the home, on the playground, in fulfilling the ordinary responsibilities of life.”

In Dewey’s opinion, there is a striking disconnect between most students’ experiences inside and outside of school, meaning many students lose interest in school. How can parents and teachers create continuity between a student’s experiences inside and outside school, both for the student’s well-being and to encourage good citizenship?

If John Dewey is to be believed, the most important thing is to ensure that whatever skills and insights a student acquires at home are useful at school, and vice versa, the hope being that students come to perceive what they learn at school as both relevant and interesting. In Dewey’s words, “Every recreation in every subject gives an opportunity for establishing cross connections between the subject matter of the lesson and the wider and more direct experiences of everyday life.”

How do parents and teachers help students establish “cross connections” between home and school?

Three methods (inspired by Dewey) come to mind:

1. Parents: Ask children about their day-to-day experiences at school.
2. Teachers: Ask students about their day-to-day experiences at home.
3. Parents and teachers: Highlight connections between lessons and activities in school and students’ experiences at home and in the community.


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Rethinking the schedule makes school more democratic

Richard Franson

If we agree with the message of the Dorothy Nolte poem "Children Learn What They Live," when it comes to children, learning citizenship for a democratic society, they need to be living it. A quote from Thomas Gordon’s book, Parent Effectiveness Training, perhaps conveys as well as words can what it means for children to live democratically: “My experience with children of all ages is that they are usually quite willing to modify their behavior when it is clear to them that they are doing dues in fact interfere with someone else's meeting his needs. When parents limit their attempts to modify children’s behavior to what is reasonable and to their respect for the needs of their parents, and agreeable to a problem-solve.” It speaks to the democratic right to self-determination, and problem solving together for the common good as the essence of democratic governance. Traditional schools were modeled on factories and designed to serve the interests of industrialization, not designed to be democratic. They are boss-managed and intended to produce an obedient if literate work force. This is not what we want from today’s students. Ken Robinson’s YouTube video “Changing Education Paradigms” makes this argument persuasively. It has been viewed more than 14 million times with more than 100,200 people giving it thumbs up. In the video, Robinson argues that children should not be fed through factory schools in an effort to standardize them. Rather, schools should nurture their ability to think differently and creatively. So what are the fundamentals of this alternative paradigm and how do we get there from here? One promising lever for change can be found in alternatives to the traditional school schedule. Larry Rosenstock, a co-founder of High Tech High, considers formal scheduling — dividing the school day into fixed chunks of time — to be the single greatest impediment to educational innovation. Robinson supports this view by saying that, if today’s businesses tried to operate the way schools do — in small, 40-minute chunks of work time punctuated by ringing bells and complete changes of scene — they would be out of business in a week. Loosening or eliminating the formal schedule can therefore be taken as one fundamental of the alternative paradigm. Loosening (or eliminating altogether) formal scheduling means that course content would no longer be delivered through class-length lectures. That assembly line process of dispensing content to students as efficiently as possible is no longer possible. Without formal scheduling, students have to become more self-directed, which according to Daniel Pink, author of the book Drive, is as it should be. "Perhaps it's time to toss the very word 'management' onto the linguistic ash heap alongside 'kernel' and 'horseless carriage," he writes. What we need, he argues, isn't better management but rather "a renaissance of self-direction," Self-directed learning in the absence of formal scheduling is in fact the basis of many emerging democratic learning models. It's a model that cultivates a community of learners in which the relationships are like those of an extended family. It provides an environment in which people can exercise the kind of respect and problem solving for the common good that Thomas Gordon advises. It is, as such, an environment where children live as democratic citizens. Of course, this renaissance cannot happen overnight. But teachers and administrators can work together to create blocks of time, scheduling classes free from the formal constraints of the bell.

Pilot project
A grassroots group in Ottawa known as OPERI (Ottawa Public Education Remake Initiative) is undertaking a small pilot program for secondary schools that’s rooted in self-directed education. It constitutes a short-term experiment that provides a long-term strategy for how public education can loosen the constraints of the formal schedule should parents, teachers and school leaders see it as the right direction to take. Details of the pilot can be found at www.operi.ca.

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Learning is a process, not preparation

What can we learn from 19th and 20th century philosophers about schooling for good citizenship in the 21st century? How can we in the 21st century avoid what Carol Black calls children’s inner “wildness.” We need adults who can think creatively and critically about the world around them, children who are curious and compassionate, children who are committed to improving the world and addressing, as Kurt Hahn put it, “the urgent problems of social life.”

To accomplish this, we might look back to what philosopher of education John Dewey told us more than a century ago. Schooling cannot be solely concerned with disconnected bits of information represented by the subject areas. Education must also be about linking acquired knowledge to community life and to everyday experiences. Dewey believed that when educational experience was rooted in relationships and authentic connections between human beings, it could spark children’s natural curiosity, creativity and wonderment — their inner wildness. Children who can eagerly embrace experience and relationships as fundamental building blocks of meaningful education, Maria Montessori, Kurt Hahn, Rudolf Steiner and Célestin Freinet shared Dewey’s commitment to crafting a school curriculum informed by life experiences.

Although their respective philosophies differed, each of their approaches to education continues to have relevance for today’s classrooms. Schools, they believed, should:

- foster strong civic virtue and social consciousness;
- embrace the values of compassion and care both for others and the planet;
- cultivate curiosity and problem-solving skills;
- envision the student as a whole being, one with prior experiences to harness;
- teach through co-operative learning techniques that seek to attain individual and collective goals;
- challenge students’ predetermined assumptions and ideas in order to teach them how to be independent, critical thinkers;
- stimulate learning through hands-on, real-life, meaningful and purpose-driven classroom experiences;
- develop a local and global consciousness;
- strive for healthy minds and bodies;
- widen students’ horizons with creative and innovative strategies;
- involve students in work towards public, community or organizational service that concretely contributes to the common good, and nurture open dialogue and respect for others and their ideas.

Nurturing these approaches is not easy work. Change always takes effort. As Mary Breen remarks in her overview of experiential education, “It is easy to espouse the theory, but it can be time-consuming and challenging to actually engage in meaningful experiential practice within the classroom.”

Change does not happen overnight. However, it does start with a single step, belief or vision. With parents’ support, each teacher can be such an agent of change, in their classroom. Teachers can emulate and embody what they aspire to see in their own students. To do so usually leads to meaningful educational experiences both for teachers and students. A focus on experience may be the key. Philosophers of education have generally agreed that attending to meaningful experiences produces tangible, valuable learning because education should be, as Dewey wrote, “a process of living and not a preparation for future living.”

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Service learning: a community-based approach

Dania Tbakhi

“Why do we have to know this?” It may be the most common question teachers and parents hear from students who are bored with being taught material that is seemingly disconnected from life outside of school. Students want to know whether concepts they are learning in school will be relevant in the “real world.” At the same time, parents want schools to help their children become good citizens who are active members of their community. What better way to raise children and young people to become deeply involved in their learning.

Parents can do to encourage critical thinking

Joel Westheimer

1. Watch the news or read a newspaper together. Encourage questions about events in the community and the world. Do a search on the web together for different perspectives on the same issue you just read or heard about.

2. Read a section of a school textbook with your child. Ask them what they think wrote the section (the idea that a person or group of people actually wrote a textbook reminds us that the words are not sacrosanct but rather represent the views of a particular time and place). Ask them if they think that a passage from a similar textbook in a different country or a different province would tell the story the same way. Why? Why not?

3. Encourage questions, even when you don’t have the answer. Don’t push aside questions about homeless people a child might see on the street, or about why so-and-so has a big house, a pool, and three cars. What are all the different ways your child’s classmates imagine organizing society? What’s fair? What’s not? Children have a natural curiosity about fairness (who hasn’t heard the phrase “it’s not fair!” a million times?)

4. Talk about school — there’s no topic more interesting and one that a child knows a bit about (from a child’s perspective). Yes, your child must follow (most) school rules. But that does not mean your child shouldn’t think about those rules and procedures and why they are done that way. Are they fair? Are they necessary? Would teachers be able to manage a classroom without rules in place? How would your child organize a classroom or a curriculum or a school? Have them draw a picture of their ideal school. What would it look like architecturally! How would teaching and learning be organized? What problems do they foresee in their school? How could they be avoided? What are the possibilities?

5. Ask questions. For at least some questions your child asks you, respond with questions of your own. What do you think? How can we find out? What would someone else who has a different interest in the issue at hand think about this?

Service learning activities can help students be more aware of their community, and, as a result, more responsible members of society.

“Service learning infuses relevance, purpose, and meaning into whatever content is being taught,” writes author Cathryn Berger Kaye in the book The Complete Guide to Service Learning. The idea of community, often seen as an abstract concept, becomes tangible as learners feel more enthusiastic about and responsible for their roles as citizens. Additionally, service learning exposes students to a variety of different opportunities in their community, which encourages future civic participation.

The outcomes that result from a community-based approach like service learning include subject-matter learning as well as both personal and social growth. First, the course content is connected to community-based activities, further enhancing students’ learning outcomes. Learning hands-on expands their grasp on the material at the same time as it demonstrates the usefulness of their new knowledge in the “real world.” Second, students experience personal growth and a sense of engagement and connection with the larger community. Third, students may gain insight into future career opportunities as they make connections with members of the community. And they also gain valuable communication skills. Service learning activities can help students think about and imagine organizing their community, and, as a result, more responsible members of society. We are all lifelong learners but the foundation of learning is built in school. By closely linking academic subject matter to experiences in the community, service learning can help students recognize their role as productive and responsible citizens. They should come to learn, understand and value their part in the community, and these authentic experiences will help enhance their sense of civic responsibility and engagement.