

Just Tinkering: Education for Civic Engagement and Electoral Sophistication in New Brunswick

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“Province Wants Mandatory Civics Courses to Increase Young Voter Turnout:”¹ So blared the headline on the CBC News website in March of 2017, and my heart sank. Just two months before, I had been invited to present to the New Brunswick Commission on Electoral Reform on the potential of civic education to enhance voter turnout and civic engagement more generally. The commissioners were generous with their time, allotting me an hour for my presentation and a follow-up discussion. My presentation focused on three key points:

- 1) So-called youth disengagement is misunderstood and solutions are often superficial and inappropriate.
- 2) The best voter education is not voter education but broader civic or political education.
- 3) There is evidence that civic understandings and engagement differ by gender.

The discussion that followed was rich and interesting, and demonstrated to me that the commissioners were quite engaged with the topic. Toward the end of the session one asked, “Would you agree we should recommend a compulsory high school course in civics?” Drawing on the key points I made in the presentation, I said I thought that was about the worst thing they could do. Now the headline and accompanying story seemed to suggest that my worst thing was exactly what the commission had recommended.

It is not that I am opposed to civic education; in fact, quite the opposite. I have been a civic educator for forty-one years (thirty-eight of those in New Brunswick) at all levels from primary to graduate school. It is that the imposition of a course to address a perceived crisis is virtually always ineffective educational policy, and is a perfect example of educational tinkering that has characterized social education generally and civic education in particular in New Brunswick over the four decades of my career.²

In 1995 David Tyack and Larry Cuban wrote a seminal book on the history of American education, titled *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*. A key argument in the book is that educational reformers often promise transformative results but deliver very little. They make the point that “over promising has often led to disillusionment and to blaming schools for not solving problems beyond their reach.”³ Over my years as a professional educator, the province of New Brunswick has had a high rhetorical commitment to educating for civic engagement, but actual policy and practice have not come close to matching that rhetoric. In terms of civic education in New Brunswick, we have not, in my view, been “tinkering toward Utopia”; rather, we have just been tinkering. I saw the commission’s recommendations as described in the press as more of the same.

As it turns out, my frustration with the commission was misplaced, or mostly so. Reading the commission’s report made it clear that the news stories had distorted their recommendations with regard to civic education, which were more in line with my presentation and our discussion than the reports suggested. Essentially, I had argued that the New Brunswick social studies curriculum was

already largely focused on civic education, so the solution was not a new course, but much more substantial support for the current curriculum in several ways: making it a priority vis-à-vis other curricular areas; resourcing it properly; and ensuring well qualified teachers were assigned to teach it. It is true that the commission recommended a specific and mandated module on civics be “introduced as part of the professional development days for all educators,” but it had not recommended a new course for students. The recommendation that “civic education programs be enhanced and applied consistently in all schools,” while rather vague and general, was consistent with the points I had made during my presentation.⁴ Having said that, the government’s tepid response seems to ensure that nothing substantial will change.

In important ways, civic education in New Brunswick is consistent with policy and practice across the democratic world. First, informed and engaged citizenship is touted as a significant goal for public education in general. According to New Brunswick’s ten-year plan for education, active citizenship is “part of the Atlantic Canada Framework for Essential Graduation Competencies as well as the pan-Canadian global competencies being developed at the national level.”⁵ Civic education is, in other words, a significant part of what public schooling is about.

Second, while it is acknowledged as a cross-curricular concern, focused attention on civic education is most evident in the social studies curriculum. The Foundation for the Atlantic Canada Social Studies Curriculum, which frames outcomes in social studies for the four Atlantic Provinces, puts it this way:

In particular, social studies, more than any other curriculum area, is vital in developing citizenship. Social studies embodies the main principles of democracy, such as freedom, equality, human dignity, justice, rule of law, and civic rights and responsibilities.⁶

Similarly, most democratic, and some not-so-democratic, jurisdictions around the world recognize citizenship as a broad goal for schooling, but give explicit curricular attention to it primarily in social studies or analogous curriculum areas.

Third, the approach to citizenship and civic engagement in the New Brunswick curriculum takes the generally civic republican orientation evident in curricula and policy around the world.⁷ Consistent with the civic republican ideal, citizenship education in the province focuses on fostering a sense of both agency and responsibility—the belief that individual citizens can make a difference and should develop the disposition to try to do so. As one of the outcomes in the Grade 9 curriculum puts it, “Students will be expected to take age-appropriate actions that demonstrate the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (local, national and global).”⁸

Fourth, New Brunswick is hardly alone in according citizenship education high rhetorical priority but low status in terms of mandating programs or allotting resources. A large international study of civic education policies and programs in twenty-four countries found that to be true almost everywhere.⁹

While citizenship education in Canada generally, and in New Brunswick in particular, fits these global patterns, my own research and experience over more than four decades tells me that we lag significantly behind many other comparable jurisdictions in attention to education for civic engagement. A number of countries around the world, as well as multinational bodies like the Council of Europe, have conducted substantial national and cross-national reviews of civics and citizenship education, often

resulting in comprehensive reforms of policy and practice.¹⁰ For example, in the late 1990s the Blair government in the UK established the Advisory Group on Citizenship under the direction of eminent political scientist Sir Bernard Crick. The group was commissioned to lead a comprehensive public review of citizenship education in England and Wales and develop recommendations for reform. Among other things, the body recommended adding citizenship to the national curriculum, which was done in 2002. In a study of my own that compared policy and practice in four advanced democracies (Australia, Canada, England, and the USA), my research team concluded that in “moving from rhetoric to reality in terms of adequate support for citizenship education,...England is the most successful, followed some way back by Australia, then the USA, while Canada is a dabbler.”¹¹ In my view, even in this relatively weak Canadian context, New Brunswick is a laggard.

One of the manifestations of this weakness is the low priority accorded social studies in terms of its place in the curriculum vis-à-vis other subjects deemed more important for preparing students for employment (principally literacy, numeracy, science, and, more recently, computer coding). Social studies also receives very little attention in terms of systematic planning. In my four decades as an educator in the province, social studies has never undergone a comprehensive K-12 review and revision. Related to this lack of planning, many individual components of the curriculum have been allowed to languish without revision for decades.

The subject area itself warrants some context. Social studies, in New Brunswick and elsewhere, is a broad designation for a curriculum area containing a range of subjects including history, geography, economics, political science, sociology, and world issues. Some courses are framed as the study of these discrete disciplines; for example Grade 11, where students study “modern history.” Others combine disciplines in the study of social issues or phenomena, such as in the Grade 8 course titled “Atlantic Canada in the Global Community.” Whatever their organizational framework, attention to citizenship is central to mandated outcomes for all social studies courses.

Traditionally, social studies was one of the core subjects offered in the curriculum, but as economic drivers exercise more influence over curriculum prioritizing, it has been pushed toward the margins—and with it explicit attention to citizenship. Space does not allow a detailed exposition of this shift, but one of the most striking examples occurred in 2010 under the Shawn Graham government with the release of the policy document *NB3-21C: Creating a 21st Century Learning Model of Public Education Three-Year Plan 2010–2013*. The number 3 in the title of the policy represented the curriculum areas the government identified as priorities. “We know,” the document stated, “that learning is rooted in high levels of student achievement in the three foundation subjects: literacy, numeracy and science.”¹² It is true that the document also identified global citizenship as one of the key twenty-first century competencies, setting out a number of sophisticated expectations. Students, the policy said, will demonstrate that they

- Are able to critically analyze the social, political, cultural and economic forces that have shaped the past and present and apply those understandings in planning for the future.
- Understand key ideas and concepts related to democracy (e.g., human rights).
- Comprehend and appreciate cultural and societal diversity in local, national and global contexts.¹³

It is difficult to see, however, how such complex outcomes might be reached when social studies is pushed to the side and the document contains not one mention of the subject area as a priority.

A similar ethos permeates the more recent ten-year plan advanced by the Brian Gallant government. In his letter introducing the very broad and ill-defined vision outlined in the plan, the premier makes clear what for him and his government is the main purpose of education. He argues, "Education is key to New Brunswick's economic future and social fabric. It is for this reason that education is such a priority of New Brunswickers. Strengthening our economy starts by strengthening our education system."¹⁴ This economic focus is reinforced later when the document elaborates the curricular initiatives that will drive the plan:

Learners must have access to creative and intellectual learning pursuits such as coding and digital literacy, scientific inquiry, skilled trades, Makerspaces and fine arts. Specialized courses will also be needed at the high school to provide students a foundation in specific industry skills.¹⁵

Again, citizenship does make an appearance in the document, but it is very much an afterthought. The one place social education makes a breakthrough of any substance in the plan is with regard to Objective 6, which calls for education to "Meet the needs of First Nations learners and ensure that provincial curriculum is reflective of First Nations history and culture." A significant section of the plan sets out some direction for doing this. This is an important development, as the discussion paper that framed the consultation leading to the development of the plan made absolutely no mention of education for and about Indigenous peoples, an area where New Brunswick lags far behind other Canadian jurisdictions. Generally, however, when social education is explicitly mentioned, it is clearly framed as the servant of "an entrepreneurial mindset."¹⁶

In contrast to New Brunswick's haphazard approach to reform in this area, the province of Alberta is currently undergoing a comprehensive review and revision of its social studies curriculum across all grade levels. This follows a similar review and revision that occurred in the early to mid-2000s. Two University of Alberta colleagues of mine recently described the open and comprehensive nature of this process. One of them is a member of the Curriculum Writing Group and the other of the Teacher and Educator Focus Group that responds to the work of the former. In addition to these professional groups,

Alberta Education has gone to great lengths to ensure the general public has opportunities to provide input to the curriculum-revision process through public consultations, online surveys, and workshops organized by the Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia. The first online survey in fall 2016 garnered over 32,000 responses, with 47 per cent of respondents self-identifying as parents/guardians.¹⁷

This initiative is significant in several ways. First, it demonstrates that social studies is enough of a priority that it merits substantial public consultation. Second, a K-12 review and revision of this nature lays the foundation for a coherent and connected curriculum that systematically addresses the content, skills, and dispositions that are the focus of social studies–civics. And, finally, my own research demonstrates that jurisdictions where wide public "debate about citizenship and citizenship education was encouraged and conducted were more likely to produce substantial and widely implemented programs in the area."¹⁸ While the extensive public consultation seems unique to Alberta and, to some

extent, Quebec,¹⁹ a number of other provinces (BC, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario) have recently completed, or are conducting, comprehensive reviews and revisions of their social studies and civics curriculum, bringing them in line with recent developments in these fields.

In the past half century, New Brunswick has never had a comprehensive K-12 review of its social studies/civic education curriculum. Instead, it has focused reform on particular levels (elementary, middle school, high school) or individual courses. The impetus for reform has often been responding piecemeal to political or public pressure. Procedurally, these efforts have paid little if any attention to elements that research demonstrates foster effective reform: consideration of how proposed changes fit in the wider curricular context; widespread professional and public consultation; careful consideration of the substantial research base in the field; professional preparation for teachers responsible for implementing new programs; the development and dissemination of high quality materials to support teaching and learning; and systematic piloting and monitoring of new approaches.

Some high school social studies courses in New Brunswick have not been revised in decades. This includes, among others, the compulsory Grade 10 course “Ancient and Medieval History: Prologue to the Present,” which was last updated twenty years ago, and the Grade 12 political science course, which is even older.²⁰ The lack of comprehensive attention to this curriculum area results in far less coherence across the grade levels than we see elsewhere. It also fails to incorporate significant new scholarship in teaching and learning in social studies, history, and civics that has been published and worked into curricula around the world over the last two decades.

In addition to the lack of priority given to developing a contemporary, comprehensive, and connected curriculum in social studies, the area most focused on fostering civic engagement, there is also some evidence of a lack of concern for ensuring that classes are taught by qualified and well prepared teachers. Several years ago in early September, a young middle school math teacher called and asked to meet with me. Her school principal had just assigned her to teach social studies. She had no background in the area so wanted to talk with me about how she might take steps to prepare. She was quite worried about this assignment, and when we met I asked what her principal had said when he gave her this assignment. She told me he said, “Don’t worry, it’s not rocket science, it is just social studies.”

I will admit that I think the principal’s views are probably reflective of a wide swath of public and even professional opinions about teaching social studies, but I would argue that it is actually much harder than teaching rocket science. A key focus for the social studies curriculum is helping citizens grapple with controversial and contested public issues (including rocket science in the form of Canadian participation in things like mutual missile defence pacts with the US). One curriculum document puts it this way:

Issues-based social studies considers the ethical dimension of issues and addresses controversial topics. It encourages consideration of opposing points of view, respect for well supported positions, sensitivities to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to social responsibility and action.²¹

Here are just a few of the issues and controversial questions facing Canadian and New Brunswick citizens today:

- How should we elect representatives to government?

- What are reasonable accommodations for diversity?
- How should we enact constitutional guarantees of minority language education rights?
- How do we balance fiscal responsibility and rights to education, health, or other government services?
- How can we build positive and just relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler populations?
- Are oil and gas pipelines an essential part of good energy policy?
- What can and should governments do to address historic injustices to groups of people in Canada?
- How can Canada meet its commitments to address climate change while sustaining the economy?
- Who or what should be the focus of public commemorations in our communities?
- Does Canada have a responsibility to contribute to UN peacekeeping or other military missions around the world?

I could go on, but you probably get the point. Citizens have to wrestle with complex and contested questions that are more ill-defined and far less predictable than virtually anything rocket science has to offer. Teaching for the development of the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to engage effectively with other citizens (including in the electoral process) is not simply a matter of relaying the steps of how a bill is passed in Parliament or the relative responsibilities of the three levels of government. It requires teachers who are highly knowledgeable and skilled in helping students, as the curriculum says, consider the ethical dimension of issues, address controversial topics, consider opposing points of view, show respect for well supported positions, be sensitive to cultural similarities and differences, and be committed to social responsibility and action. This goes well beyond rocket science.

I do realize my tale about the young math teacher is not evidence of widespread practice of assigning out-of-field teachers to teach social studies. In New Brunswick we do not, as is done in some other jurisdictions, track the misassignment of teachers, but there is considerable anecdotal evidence that it happens a lot. A recent internal report for Elections Canada, for example, says “Early, middle and senior years social studies teachers are most often responsible for civic education, but frequently have little formal background or training for the task.”²² For a number of years in the early 2000s I was part of a Canada-EU exchange agreement that brought student teachers from three European countries (England, Germany, and Sweden) to teach in New Brunswick schools. Those teachers focused on teaching high school were surprised—shocked, actually—that they were often placed with history or social studies teachers with little academic background in the subject area. It is something they said would almost never happen in their home jurisdictions.

It is interesting, and not a little ironic, that teacher certification regulations in New Brunswick require secondary teacher candidates to have substantial background in the disciplines they plan to teach before granting a certificate and teacher’s licence, but once through that process educators can teach in any subject or any level whether or not they have academic background. This is true even though

virtually all curricula emphasize students learning important disciplinary concepts and processes. Teachers without the requisite disciplinary background are unable to do this well.

In addition to this, a recent study that colleagues and I conducted about teachers' conceptions of ethnic diversity (a key component of the social studies/civics curriculum) demonstrated that New Brunswick elementary school teachers have very little pre-service or in-service education for teaching this aspect of the curriculum. Many teachers told us that social studies at the elementary level was not a priority; the resources provided were sparse and superficial; and they almost never had opportunities for in-service professional learning related to diversity or citizenship. One told us that in her twenty-five years of teaching she had never seen a workshop offered on how to teach for and about diversity, a key aspect of civic life in Canada. This despite the fact that elementary curricula set out very sophisticated outcomes for students to meet. In effect, teachers have been given what is called in policy work an "unfunded mandate." Writing about this situation in New Brunswick ten years ago, colleagues and I concluded that

Educational policies and mandates, without the capacity to carry them out by clear goals, accessible materials, appropriate training and access to reliable research and policy information, put practitioners at all levels in an impossible situation. Teachers have an obligation to pursue the policies of the state, but without access to the human and material resources necessary, they find it impossible to infuse life into the inert requirements of public policy and program directives.²³

Our most recent research indicates that nothing has changed in the ensuing decade.²⁴

Implications for Electoral Reform

One of the key points in my presentation to the Commission on Electoral Reform was that "the best voter education is not voter education, but broader civic and political education." I was very pleased to see that the commission's report actually set that quote in a textbox to draw attention to it. My research and that of others around the world supports this contention and demonstrates a number of things about young voters and potential voters. First, they do not need instruction on how or why to vote. The former, in Canada at least, is easy, and they can already express very sophisticated and well thought-out reasons for the latter.²⁵ Second, young people's basic political frame, including their orientation to public policy and various facets of engagement, including voting, is being developed before they are out of middle school.²⁶ A single course at high school or a low-priority, poorly resourced social studies curriculum will do little to alter that trajectory. Third, good curricula, school policies, and teaching have a positive impact on civic understandings, skills, and dispositions to engage positively in democratic life.²⁷

In their recent book, *The Political Classroom*, Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy reported on a very large study of social studies teaching and learning that involved 1,001 students, thirty-five teachers, and twenty-one high schools from three states in the U.S. Data collection included surveys, interviews, and multiple classroom observations. A significant number of students were surveyed and interviewed twice more in the five years following their high school graduation to gauge the longer-term impacts of their civic education experiences. This comprehensive study demonstrates that well-planned, resourced, and delivered education matters to civic engagement, including participation in the electoral system. Hess and McAvoy report,

Students in classes with rich and frequent discussion of controversial political issues describe these courses as engaging, become more confident in their ability to participate competently in discussions, demonstrate increased political knowledge, and display more interest in politics. They follow the news more regularly, are more likely to engage in political discussions with people with whom they disagree ideologically, and are more interested in listening to opinions different from their own.²⁸

This research, and other studies like it from around the world, demonstrates that through substantial and well taught civic education programs young people have the capacity to develop quite sophisticated civic knowledge and skills, and will be much more likely to use those in positive civic engagement. Some of my own research on young people and voting, for example, shows that students as young as fifteen or sixteen exhibit “a fairly sophisticated understanding of voting and its place in the political system.”²⁹ Those same teenagers, however, express a fair degree of cynicism about voting and other aspects of the formal political system. They feel the system as it is “offers little real choice, is unresponsive to their concerns, and ordinary politicians have very little real power to effect change.”³⁰ Their concerns are not insubstantial and, in fact, in important ways mirror those raised by proponents of democratic reform in general and electoral reform in particular.³¹ Good civic education will help these young people make important contributions to important elements of the ongoing Canadian conversation.

It seems clear to me that a well-balanced education system must pay attention not only to basic skills and to future economic and employment opportunities, but must also address what it means to be a good, well-rounded human being and an engaged, effective, and empathetic citizen. This requires attention to a much broader range of subject or discipline areas than those highlighted in the ten-year plan. This attention must be focused not only on creating and resourcing curricula in these areas but also in providing both initial and in-service teacher education to prepare the best educators to deliver those curricula. If the government of New Brunswick is serious about moving beyond tinkering and honouring its long-held rhetorical commitment to fostering effective citizenship, there is much work to be done.

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