

Youth Civic Engagement, Knowledge and Literacy as Challenges to the Modern Democracy: A Participatory Approach to Civics Education as a Policy Response in Canada

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Abstract

Across the Western world, many democracies are facing the same problem as Canada – youth civic engagement, knowledge and attentiveness to the political realm are in sharp decline. This reality creates a difficult situation for policy makers and politicians alike, as disengagement to this degree has never been experienced before. In Canada, youth voter turnout is at all time lows, with no signs of rebounding. More and more, young people today lack both the skills they need to engage with the political system and the interest to do so. There are some attempts being made across the country to help improve upon this through high school civics education, but they lack the appropriate pedagogy and sufficient support from politicians and governments at large. Though, in Ontario civics education does exist and through a discussion of the policy process and agenda setting, its presence will be considered in terms of how it passed through policy channels to become a part of the high school curriculum. Furthermore, research has shown that youth civic disengagement is a very real problem across Canada and led to some experts calling today's youth political dropouts. Without action to bring more young people back from their apathetic stand, our democracy will face crucial challenges with regard to participation at the polls and maintaining an informed and active citizenry into the future. However, new approaches have been applied in other jurisdictions and have shown some success, offering frameworks for Canada to consider.

Youth Civic Engagement, Knowledge and Literacy as Challenges to the Modern
Democracy: A Participatory Approach to Civics Education as a Policy Response in
Canada

Introduction and Methodology

This paper seeks to convey how deficits in youth civic engagement, knowledge and literacy are important issues that need addressing across Canada as in a few short years, this generation will be taking over from their parents. In looking to understand how best to address these issues through the educational system, civics education is presented as a potential solution. However, research suggests that attempts at civics education across Canada are weak, even though suitable models exist in other jurisdictions. Such a civics program exists in Ontario for grade 10 students and a major aspect of this paper is the analysis of how well this course aligns with research in the fields of youth civics education and youth engagement. Evaluating this course is not a straightforward task as the provincial government has no evaluation measures in place, nor are there any clear proxy measures of its success. In order to fill this void in evaluation measures, an examination of the curriculum guidelines, their execution in the classroom and ability to help students become effective citizens through participation in the course will be used as core elements for evaluating Ontario civics classes. Also, because civics classes sometimes deal with contentious topics that are met with resistance, the implementation and how these barriers were dealt with will shed light on the aspects of the policy process involved and where improvements could be made.

These factors will be the basis for examining whether or not Ontario civics classes meet basic standards in civics education and what their actual success was after their introduction in 2000.

Part 1: Understanding Youth Civic Disengagement and Getting to the Interactive Model of Civics Education

Background

Although Canada is not alone in its situation of declining youth engagement, we should not be complacent simply because many Western democracies are in the same boat. No matter how one interprets the situation, the reality remains that young people in Canada and across many other comparable Western countries are less engaged and knowledgeable about the political realm than previous generations. This has led to a democratic deficit in civic and political participation that can be demonstrated through a number of indicators such as voting and interaction with the political realm.¹ The first section of this paper will seek to explain what is meant by youth civic engagement and offer a picture of Canada's youth with respect to their overall engagement, knowledge and interest toward the political system. As well, it will look to how certain other factors influence these critical capacities.

Youth civic engagement is somewhat of a loaded term and there are many interpretations of what it can mean. However, for the purposes of this paper youth

¹ Milner, *The Internet Generation*, 2010

civic engagement will be defined as the different avenues that young people follow in order to participate in public affairs. Young people or youth can be defined as those generally in their late teens through their mid 20's, although this definition differs from researcher to researcher. Public affairs can include more traditional political activities such as engaging in electoral politics, becoming a member of a political party or signing a petition. Young people could also be engaged with what is generally described as 'other' political activities such as attending a rally or protest, joining a social justice movement, choosing a product for ethical reasons or taking part in a boycott.² The reason these two streams of activities are differentiated is that research has shown that young people are less involved in traditional political activities and more involved in the non-traditional than older Canadians. It is young people's lack of involvement with the traditional political landscape that is of great concern and will be discussed at length in forthcoming sections.

The term civic knowledge will be used throughout this paper and is defined by Glaston as something that:

Helps citizens understand and promote their interests and increases the consistency of their views across issues and time. It allows them to understand political events and integrate new information into an existing framework, and to alter those views when appropriate. Civic knowledge reduces mistrust of, or alienation from public life; [and] promotes support for democratic values and political participation.³

² Howe, *Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians*, 2010

³ Milner, *The Internet Generation*, 2010, p. 10

Civic knowledge can be characterized simply as the skills and capacities needed in order function in the political world as an effective and informed citizen. It is the precursor to civic literacy in that it is necessary to establish this baseline knowledge before going more in-depth and incorporating additional factors into an understanding of civic society.

Building upon the concept of civic knowledge comes political or civic literacy. Milner describes it as being a basic knowledge of key issues, the actors that support them and having a degree of familiarity with the relevant institutions of decision making. Furthermore, he notes that the crucial characteristic of a politically literate individual is the degree of attention paid to the political world and its events.⁴ Through paying attention to different sources of information and taking in a wide variety of opinions, the citizen becomes highly literate in the civic and political realm.

Turning away from the ideal conceptions of citizen engagement, we now look to the reality of the situation in Canada in order to further substantiate the issue of declining youth civic engagement. However, in order to arrive at this point, current measures of civic engagement need to be explained and examined.

Civic Engagement, Knowledge and Literacy in Practice

In Canada, we are unfortunately behind the rest of the Western world in trying to measure engagement levels of both the youth and broader population. Throughout his discussion of civic knowledge and literacy, Milner is able to cite

⁴ Ibid

multiple Scandinavian and Northern European studies that have measured these factors among youth, such as the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the European Social Survey.⁵ However, this type of information is not available on a consistent basis in Canada and has led to researchers having to conduct their own surveys of civic knowledge. They also turn to the most common indicator of the engagement of the young and old, voter participation rates.

Paul Howe, a leading researcher in the field, argues that voter participation rates are a valuable indicator for citizen engagement. Although these rates may not be a perfect indicator, he describes how they do offer a “census of all eligible citizens” and in this instance where everyone has the opportunity and right to participate in democracy, it measures how many actually do so.⁶ With that in mind, where do youth voter participation rates in Canada currently stand and how do they stack up with the other segments of the population? In short, they are low, lower than other age groups and paint a worrisome picture for the future of Canadian democracy. As Howe points out, this indicates that there is something wrong with the functioning of Canadian democracy today.⁷

Other researchers in the field also believe that low voter turnout is a symptom of a much larger societal problem of disengagement and low civic knowledge and literacy, explained as “the proportion of citizens with the minimum level of political knowledge needed to make sense of the political world”.⁸ Hughes and Sears describe this disengagement from the political process as ignorance of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Howe, *Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians*, 2010, p.3

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Milner, *The Internet Generation*, 2010, p.8

civic institutions and their processes and as a part of a larger crisis of citizenship.⁹ Milner cites some of his previous work where he revealed that the level of civic literacy corresponds to the level of voter turnout. In practical terms, these findings demonstrate the connection between the level of civic literacy and voting among the general population. In effect, only the citizens with the minimal level of civic literacy needed to understand the political world actually come out to the polls. It would appear that only between 60 and 65% of Canadians have at least basic ability to understand politics, as this is the percentage that has taken the time to cast a ballot. In other countries that have high levels of civic literacy, Milner has found that they also have high levels of informed political participation.¹⁰

Finally, after pointing to research he conducted analyzing the level of voting with the level of engagement in the civic realm at large, Howe concludes that “failure to vote election after election *is* a reliable indicator of a broader disengagement that manifests itself across other forms of political and civic involvement.”¹¹ In essence, by showing that youth voter turnout is low and that civic literacy is also low, the case is being made that young people of today’s generation do not know enough about the civic realm and as a whole have become highly disengaged. Simply put, by not voting, young people are showing that they are not civically knowledgeable and not politically literate. And if young people are letting their deficiency in knowledge impact their voting habits and overall civic engagement, why should the Canadian population at large and policy makers be concerned? Answers to these questions are

⁹ Hughes & Sears, 2008

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Howe, *Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians*, 2010, p. 32

rooted in the core concepts of citizen participation and democracy to be discussed as follows.

Disengaged Youth and Concerns for the Future of Canadian Democracy

Although the concerns with young people having a severe lack of skills and knowledge of the civic and political realm have been touched on, their impacts are clearly laid out by Milner. He terms those who could be described as having low civic knowledge and political literacy as ‘political dropouts’ and points out how that as they age, they will be replacing older generations. He worries about how the current and future generations will potentially contain increasingly large numbers of these ‘political dropouts’ and that this “threatens the very principle of informed active consent by a majority of citizens which underlies democracy.”¹² In illustrating the impacts of low youth knowledge, Milner describes a number of aspects of democracy that are negatively affected by these political dropouts and a rationale why political literacy is so essential.

He first describes political dropouts as being a challenge facing modern democracies as when a majority of their citizens are not able to participate in an informed manner, they are undermining the foundations of the democratic way of life.¹³ In context, if this situation of low knowledge and literacy is combined with Howe’s earlier worries of a voter participation rate of at or below 50 % of the eligible population, the underpinnings of Canadian democracy are clearly threatened. They are threatened in the sense that citizen participation in

¹² Milner, *The Internet Generation*, 2010, p. 25

¹³ *Ibid.*

representative democracies is the best way to ensure that the interests of the population at large are heard, as John Stuart Mill has argued.¹⁴ If young people are not voting at rates above 40 % and driving the overall turnout below 50 %, then over half of the country's population is not having their voices heard.

Further, he cites another author, Schudson, who describes politically literate citizens as 'monitorial', meaning that they scan the information available to them and are able to be mobilized on those issues. As well, Schudson considers political literacy to be a crucial element of democracy as it allows people to identify different points of view on issues. He takes this to the extreme in his view that when citizens access only one point of view they are self-censoring and may end up blindly following one political leader who agrees with their view. He concludes by saying that this situation can arise through active and malicious political censorship, but happens just as easily through politically illiterate citizens.¹⁵

It will be demonstrated through a numerous of types of evidence that today's young people are not at all civically or politically knowledgeable and literate, as well as they lack participation in civic acts and are not becoming engaged citizens. Evidence will also show that unconventional forms of political participation are not substituting for traditional ones,¹⁶ meaning that although young people may be involved in certain areas, they are still not participating in critical ones such as voting. Overall, this situation could lead to some of the unsustainable situations for a healthy Canadian democracy as described by Schudson.

¹⁴ O'Neill, *Democracy, Models of Citizenship and Civic Education*, 2009

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Milner, *The Internet Generation*, 2010

The Abysmal State of Canadian Voter Turnout

Before turning to youth, understanding the historical picture of voter turnout in Canada is important, as this will demonstrate the trends in both youth and older age groups over time. Since World War II, aggregate voter turnout has hovered at about 75%, with the odd year dipping below. However, since the federal election in the fall of 2000, turnout has not risen above 65% and in 2008, Canada hit an all time historical low (since Confederation) of 58.8%, followed by an equally unimpressive 61.1 % in May of 2011.¹⁷ Clearly, there is a downward trend in aggregate voter participation and Howe, Milner and others warn we may not have seen the end of yet.

In terms of how voting rates for youth stack up against older populations, the table below offers a snapshot of the past few federal elections where the disparity becomes plainly visible.

Table 1 – Percent voter turnout in federal election years by age group¹⁸

Age	2004	2006	2008
18 to 24	37.0	43.8	37.4
25 to 34	44.0	49.8	48.0
35 to 44	54.5	61.6	53.9
45 to 54	66.0	70.0	59.7
55 to 64	72.9	75.4	65.6
65 to 74	75.5	77.5	68.4
75 plus	63.9	61.6	67.3

¹⁷ Heard, 2011

¹⁸ Howe, Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians, 2010, p. 7

This table shows that youth voter turnout (here, ages 18 to 24) has been around 40% for the past few federal elections, a clear 20% below aggregate turnout and below the turnout of all other age groups. Harkening to Howe's earlier claim of the value of this measure, it is clear that very few youth are choosing to participate in this capstone event of democracy. Although voting is understood to be a function of age, in that, as people grow older they tend to vote at a higher rate (as we can see in Table 1), there have also been cohort effects observed to be taking place with those born during the 1980's. What these effects mean is that young people today (the cohort born since the 1980's) are voting at lower rates than young people in previous cohorts. The theory is that as they age, they will continue to vote at lower rates.¹⁹ Howe cites this as a primary concern in looking at voter participation and posits that if this trend holds for the cohort born in the 1980's, we could see an average voter participation rate become steady at around 55% and at times dip below 50%, unearthing a whole range of democratic questions when less than half the eligible population elects a government.²⁰

Canadian Levels of Civic or Political Knowledge and the Youth Deficit

Turning to the level of knowledge of the youth population, it is much harder to measure than voter participation, as Canadian governments do not ask questions that would yield this data, therefore it is only available through large scale surveys. It is this type of information gathering that will be used to better understand the level of civic knowledge and literacy of Canadians and more specifically Canadian

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

youth. As a very basic measure of the political literacy of Canadians, Brenda O'Neill conducted such a survey. She asked Canadians of all ages if they could identify the Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and the Party in Official Opposition in Ottawa. All age groups that she asked were able to correctly identify the PM at about the same rate, however that is where the similarities ended. The youngest age group surveyed, the 18 to 27 years olds, were only able to identify the Minister of Finance and the Official Opposition correctly 22 and 20 % of time respectively. Other age groups, such as the 48 to 57 year olds were able to identify the Minister and Opposition correctly 61 and 45 % of the time.²¹ Clearly, there is a large gap in the knowledge of young Canadians compared to that of older generations. O'Neill relates this disparity to political attentiveness, a concept that will be used later on to help explain reasons for low youth civic knowledge.

Also seeking to measure the knowledge of young Canadians, Howe undertook a large survey in 2007 and 2008 called the Canadian Citizen Engagement Survey (CCES) where some 2,000 individuals of all age ranges and all across the country were asked questions about the civic realm. In describing the goals of this survey, he explains that he wanted to measure the level of political knowledge, as well to take the survey of civic knowledge in a different direction by asking new types of questions than others had done in the past. He describes the three different types of knowledge measured in the survey. First, surveillance knowledge, which is described as being both trivial²² such as the O'Neill survey and substantive, which is

²¹ O'Neill, 2001

²² Trivial in the sense that one does not need a great understanding of the concept, but merely needs to remember a name associated with a position in government.

characterized as knowledge that helps to inform someone's political view. Secondly, emergent knowledge is concerned with issues that are not generally a focal point of mainstream politics and it is argued that these areas are where young people direct more of their attention. Finally, civic or institutional knowledge is explained as being different from surveillance in that it is meant to gauge the understanding of the rules that govern our democratic institutions.²³

What was discovered through this survey was not surprising; young Canadians (for the purposes Howe's survey those aged 18 to 34) are less knowledgeable about civics than any other age group. This also held true for all three different kinds of knowledge that were examined. For example, a surveillance question asked respondents to identify the premier of their own province, 61% of youth answered correctly compared to 82% of 55 to 69 year olds. A substantive surveillance question asked what federal party is closely linked to unions, only 29% of young people answered correctly compared to 59% of the above older group.

Civics questions exemplify the disparity between the different age groups, but also speak to a general lack of civic knowledge of the entire Canadian population. When asked to name two positions appointed by the PM within government, only 12% of young people and 27% of 55 to 69 year olds could successfully name two.²⁴ With such a broad range of positions that are appointed by the PM, from Senators, to Supreme Court Justices, the Governor General, and heads of arms length agencies, the fact that a majority of all Canadians were not able to name any is striking.

²³ Howe, *Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians*, 2010

²⁴ *Ibid*

Overall, Howe offers a few conclusions that come from analysis of his previous work in the areas and from this survey. First of all, because of the high correlations across the different types of knowledge, it is possible to aggregate them to produce one overall index of citizen knowledge. This index demonstrated the average correct response rate for all ages. For those 18 to 34, the average correct response rate was 35% and for those aged 55 to 69, 52%. This index shows there is no evidence that young Canadians know any more than older generations in the areas surveyed. Secondly, even if the questions are geared more toward the perceived priorities of young people (the CCES asked questions regarding the Kyoto Accord, Amnesty International and the mission in Afghanistan) the knowledge gap becomes smaller, but does not go away.

Howe ends this discussion with a reflection that as political knowledge of various sorts is considered essential for citizen's capacity to participate and engage, that "the knowledge deficit among younger generations cannot be considered inconsequential."²⁵ The question could then be asked, if this disparity between the knowledge and voting habits of different generations has not been observed before, what factors have led to the youth knowledge deficit we face today? Although not the focus of this paper, as reasons for youth disengagement and low civic and political literacy constitute a thesis on their own, there are some capacities and habits that young people today do not possess in comparison to previous generations. What will be explored is how the level of attention that young people today are paying to politics can be measured and observed.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 112.

In Practice, Where Today's Youth Fall Short

It follows that if young people today are less knowledgeable about civics and politics than other generations were at the same age, there is something different taking place today. The academic consensus is that young people simply do not pay attention to politics and civics in the same manner or to the same degree that other generations did. In an effort to better understand the overall Canadian picture of attentiveness to politics, O'Neill surveyed the amount of attention each age group reported they paid to politics. She asked Canadians "would you say that you follow politics very closely, fairly closely, not very closely or not at all?"²⁶ What she found was again not surprising. Young people pay less attention to politics than older generations. In every age group, except the youngest (ages 18 to 27), the majority reported that they followed politics closely.²⁷ Howe explains how the inattentiveness of young people makes up the behavioral and attitudinal aspects of being an engaged citizen and contributes to their lack of level of interest and tendency not to keep up with political news, regardless of the abundance of information available on the Internet today.

Howe further describes inattentiveness through his own research into the rate at which different age groups follow the news and current affairs daily. Howe found that for those aged 15 to 19, just over 30% reported following the news and current affairs daily, compared to 65% of 30 to 39 years olds; 75% of 40 to 49 years

²⁶ O'Neill, 2001, p. 11

²⁷ Ibid

olds and 80% of 50 to 59 year olds.²⁸ With that in mind, it is easy to see how many young people also end up with an inadequate base of political knowledge and do not participate in public affairs. In attempting to connect the dots between voting, knowledge, literacy and overall engagement of youth, Howe offers this summary:

Voting, for example, entails making a choice between competing candidates, parties, campaign platforms, and ideologies. Those who do not pay attention to politics are less likely to be in a position to make such a choice with any degree of certainty or commitment...demonstrations and public meetings are less likely to be attended [and] petitions less likely to be signed by those lacking familiarity with the pressing issues of the day.²⁹

From this discussion of inattentiveness, the take away message should be that young people pay less attention to the political world, which has an impact on their levels of knowledge and propensity to participate. Essentially, it is this lack of civic and political knowledge that is a major driving factor in young people's inability to interact and be engaged with the civic and political realm.

Because of the potential impact of youth's inattentiveness and lack of knowledge, there exists a role for government in this instance to act. In this case, action would take the form of implementing new policy to attempt to remedy or at least ameliorate the situation. With research suggesting that there is a direct relationship between civic engagement/participation and political knowledge,

²⁸ Howe, *Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians*, 2010

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 44

addressing the knowledge challenge would be the approach most likely to positively impact low engagement and participation levels.³⁰

Civics Education – A Policy Response to the Youth Civic Engagement Crisis

In seeking to address this issue, governments have a clear choice in civics education as it one of the few opportunities that the state has to directly attempt to improve civic literacy.³¹ There is no other public institution besides the education system “that has the capacity to reach a greater number of young people in a sustained and meaningful way.”³² With an already established mandate in the education field, pursuing civics education to increase political knowledge has begun to become a prominent tool used by provincial governments in Canada and in other jurisdictions across the world. This approach to addressing the problem is largely predicated on research which has shown that civics education is one key way to address some of the underlying impediments to youth participation, such as the low levels of knowledge and attentiveness that have been previously outlined.³³ With clear evidence supporting civics education as an appropriate policy tool for governments to reach young people, discussing the core elements of these courses and approach to teaching is important in understanding how they can impact the youth knowledge deficit.

Joel Westheimer, researcher and co-director of *Democratic Dialogue*, a research collaboration for inquiries into democracy, education and society defines

³⁰ Llewellyn, Cook, Westheimer, Giron, & Suurtamm, 2007

³¹ Ibid

³² Westheimer, 2005, p. 27

³³ Howe, Electoral Participation of Young Canadians - Working Paper, 2007

civics education as “a means to teach the critical and deliberative skills necessary to participate effectively in contentious public debates” and that it is essential to recognize that controversy, ideological sparring, debate and deliberation are all cornerstone activities in democratic societies.³⁴ Many educators and policy makers also agree that, although a contested and elusive goal, if citizens are to interact effectively with the political and civic realm in their community, they require the knowledge, skills, habits and behaviors of participation that democracy necessitates.³⁵ In sum, central to all ideas of civics education is that students are learning basic skills and information they will need to interact and participate with the civic and political realm and its various institutions. Both during the time they are in the classes and for the rest of their lives.

Although citizenship education has existed in many social science or history curricula in Canada in one form or another throughout the 20th century, the focus specifically on civics began with the realization that Canadian voter turnout and youth participation was declining through the 1990's.³⁶ However, there are many different realities when looking to how civics education has been put into practice in Canada and around the world. As one author points out, schools can be considered both the cause and the solution to the problem in that they are for the most part teaching civics, but not doing so in the most effective manner or with the proper materials.³⁷ What follows is a discussion of the frameworks and components an ideal and interactive model of civics education would contain. These ideal

³⁴ Wesheimer, 2004, p. 231

³⁵ Llewellyn, Cook, Westheimer, Giron, & Suurtamm, 2007, p. 9

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Osborne, 2005

frameworks will serve as the basis for measuring Ontario civics education in the second part of this paper.

The Wellsprings of the Interactive Approach to Civics

Currently, a model that can be described as interactive or participatory civics is considered the best practice by many academics in the field such as Howe, Milner, Westheimer, Hughes and Sears because it allows students to build knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom in an engaging manner. As Hughes and Sears describe, there is consensus across the democratic world about the status of key elements of citizenship. First, that democratic citizenship is in a state of crisis due to the lack of knowledge among many populations. Second, there is a belief that this crisis can be addressed by effective citizenship education and that moving toward constructivist approaches to teaching and learning in citizenship education is the best practice.³⁸

Constructivist ideas of civic education relate very closely to the definitions of civics mentioned above. Specifically, these classes would see students engaged in meaningful activities that are designed to aid them in being able to make sense of the civic realm and its various practices. Such an approach would also encourage student engagement with important issues related to citizenship.³⁹ It is also noted that learning about government and citizenship through memorizing facts is not nearly as effective as participatory or interactive programs. This can be done through classroom discussion, in which students are encouraged by teachers to

³⁸ Hughes & Sears, 2008

³⁹ Ibid.

debate national and political issues. It is also these students who score higher on civic engagement scales than other students.⁴⁰

Westheimer also supports the constructivist approach and describes how facts are seen as the Holy Grail of education today, but does not believe this so readily applies to civics education. In civics programs that he has studied, findings suggest that students tended to learn more factual knowledge (facts) through authentic participation in democratic projects that are not solely aimed at having students learn more facts and facts alone. What this means is that in civics education programs, knowledge does not necessarily lead to greater participation. However, having a curriculum that is based on participation and interaction with aspects of democratic governments, the legislative process and elections, student participation in the community leads to a quest for knowledge (more acts equals more facts). Westheimer has found that once students gained experience in the community, they began to ask substantive questions about the topic and take on research to discover their own answers.⁴¹

This approach to civics education generally contains elements of what is often termed 'service learning', whereby student engagement with the community through volunteering activities seeks to build citizenship. Service learning is something that is becoming increasingly popular in schools in the United States and Canada as well.⁴² As will be discussed later, Ontario has incorporated volunteering as a mandatory aspect of its civics education course. Service learning aims to

⁴⁰ Stolle & Cruz, 2005

⁴¹ Westheimer, 2005

⁴² Sears, 2004

address engagement issues through a few key concepts such as political efficacy, described as helping students believe that they can participate effectively in the civic and public realm. Also, this sense of efficacy helps them to believe that they can make a difference and will potentially impact future participation, in that when students grow into adults, they will be more likely to be participatory citizens.⁴³

This type of political efficacy, although not distinguished by Sears, is what would be considered internal political efficacy. Westheimer and Kahne explain that in addition, there is also external political efficacy, that the two are easily distinguished and have implications for civic education. Internal political efficacy has more to do with a person's sense of their ability to participate effectively in the political process and people with high internal efficacy tend to also be confident that they are capable in engaging in civic affairs.⁴⁴ External political efficacy relates to a citizen's perceptions of government's and intuition's responsiveness to their needs and demands. Therefore, the authors claim it would make sense for civics education to attempt to promote students' sense of internal efficacy in order to build their sense of personal competence in engaging with the civic and political realms.⁴⁵

Putting the interactive approach in context with the earlier argument that young people lack civic knowledge and literacy, it is not meant to dispute the claim that low civic knowledge leads to low levels of engagement. However, introducing this approach to civics merely explains that traditional teaching methods do not encourage discussion or interaction with democratic institutions. Traditional

⁴³ Sears, 2004

⁴⁴ Kahne & Westheimer, 2006

⁴⁵ Kahne & Westheimer, 2006

methods also have less success in terms of the knowledge that students acquire compared to those rooted in the constructivist approach. Although the constructivist approach is generally recognized to be the best in terms of civics education, there are also debates within these circles as to what are the sorts of values that students are being exposed to through civics education. In seeking to explain what some of the curriculum in a civics course would look like and the debates that surround teaching them, Westheimer's typology of civics courses and how they can influence students will be discussed.

A Typology of Civics Courses and the Citizens They Seek to Foster

Civics courses differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, however Westheimer has studied many of these courses in Canada and the United States and finds that there are number of different 'citizens' that civics courses tend to produce. In studying this phenomenon, he works from the perspective that young people are not the engaged citizens that they could be. This is due to their lack of civic knowledge, literacy and engagement and through civics education we are impacting the type of citizen that they become. Having said that, the three types of citizens that he describes are the personally responsible, participatory and social justice-orientated citizens.⁴⁶ Adding the caveat that these categories are not meant to imply that all civics education classes must fit neatly within, but that they are useful ways in which to discuss the differences in the manner that civics education programs seek to foster democratic participation. Explaining the three types citizens will also help

⁴⁶ Westheimer, 2005

expose the roots of some of the tension when students are being taught more from one perspective and how it can cause conflict with parents and administrators.

In attempting characterize the nature of Westheimer's typology, it could also be described as a look at different types of citizen engagement, as this is one of the larger distinguishing characteristics between the three visions of the good citizen. First, the personally responsible citizen could be seen as a more traditional view of what a good citizen would be. Described as someone who would act responsibly in the community, work, pay taxes, obey laws, recycle, give blood, volunteers in times of crisis and donates to the food bank. This type of citizen would be fostered through students being encouraged to engage with their immediate community and build good character through being responsible, law-abiding members of the community.⁴⁷

Secondly, the participatory citizen might be seen as a very active and engaged member of the community, someone who organizes community events and that others look up to. They would take on such tasks as organizing community improvement efforts or events to help those in need, promote economic development or protect the environment. They would also know a lot about government agencies and they would be more likely to organize a food bank event over donating alone. Strategies for teaching such behaviors would include having a strong understanding of how government, community and other institutions work

⁴⁷ Ibid

independently and together, as well as emphasizing the importance of planning and participating in those efforts.⁴⁸

Thirdly, the justice-orientated citizen would be someone who is much more critical of the status quo and would assess social, political and economic structures in order to question the root cause of perceived problems. They would also be very active in seeking out and addressing social justice issues, along with having involvement and knowledge of different social and political movements. This person would be more likely to question why people are hungry and work to address the underlying issue, rather than volunteering their time at a food bank. In teaching for such a citizen, students would be guided more in the direction of questioning, analyzing and addressing social issues, rather than the emphasis on volunteering that we would see in the participatory citizen.⁴⁹

Presenting these different views on the type of citizen that civics aims to foster should also come with the caveat that they could all lead to valuable, engaged and civically literate citizens. Recognizing their different contribution to the community is important, but choosing which approach civics courses will take does sometimes cause disagreement and create barriers to success. The Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology reported that modern citizenship requires that people participate in their own governance through possessing the necessary skills and that this raises difficult questions as to how this should be taught to young people and the rest of the population at large.⁵⁰ Unearthing that there is no easy

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Llewellyn, Cook, Westheimer, Giron, & Suurtamm, 2007

answer to which citizen we want or how we want to attain that goal. Sears also points out that there is considerable agreement that public education should be working to prepare students for democratic citizenship, but there is little consensus surrounding what is meant by the term ‘good citizen’ as can be seen in Westheimer’s typology.⁵¹ All of this is to say that both government and researchers in the field recognize the importance of this type of knowledge, yet the instruction portion is where issues begin.

The difficulty in designing civics education programs is something that many jurisdictions in Canada have experience with. However, there is such a strong basis of academic literature for civics education, modeled after a constructivist approach that exists today. With such models in place, looking to cases where civics has been put into practice and reviewing the parallels can illustrate the state of civics education in Ontario. This next section seeks to answer some of those questions through examining Ontario’s Grade 10 civics education classes and the barriers to success that were encountered throughout their introduction and what role these played in the end product.

Part 2: Ontario’s Grade 10 Civics Education Classes – Shortcomings and Barriers to Successful Implementation

In Brief: Where Civics Started in Ontario

⁵¹ Sears, 2004

Introduced in the wake of the Royal Commission on Learning, civics education was first taught to students in Ontario in the fall of 2000. The Royal Commission on Learning (the Commission) began work in May of 1993 and released its findings in 1995 in a report called *For the Love of Learning*.⁵² In order to better understand the role the Commission's report played in the evolution of civics classes, some of the specific recommendations will be examined. Although, there are no clear instances where the Commission directly named civics education as a means to improving the civic knowledge of Ontario's youth. There are however multiple instances where issues of concern for the future are discussed, some of which could lend themselves to being addressed through civics education.

The Commission points to areas of concern such as changes in the capacity of traditional social institutions and the status of societal values. They explain that they interpret there to be a sense that some traditional social institutions are being broken down "and the family as well as the community and religious organizations, are no longer able to instill personal and ethical values in successive generations of Canadians."⁵³ The report also cites observations that Canadians have been losing faith in public institutions of late and that public schools need to operate in the changing reality of the society that they find themselves in.⁵⁴ Although, as there are no clear calls for civics in the Commission's report, officials from the Ministry of Education (MOE) must have had civics on their radar in order for certain problem areas identified by the Commission to lead to the introduction of a civics course.

⁵² Ministry of Education - Ontario, 2006

⁵³ Ministry of Education - Ontario, 2006, p. 23/4

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Lewis has done considerable research in this area in order to try and uncover some of the origins of civics in Ontario, but found that there are few who recall the details of the process, even those involved with the policy design itself. Former NDP Minister of Education David Cooke is quoted in saying that he remembers there being some talk of civic education, but that it was quickly overtaken by other priorities. Beyond this, what Lewis has been able to uncover is that civics did go through the eight or nine rounds of consultation that the rest of the new curriculum did as well,⁵⁵ and what emerged was a civics curriculum that could be said to have various elements of constructivist approaches to teaching. The emergence of civics onto the policy agenda will be discussed at length in forthcoming sections, but for now the focus will be on the curriculum guidelines themselves.

Analysis of the Ontario Civics Curriculum – Constructivist on Paper

To better grasp the wellsprings of the Ontario civics course, turning to the curriculum guidelines provided by the province will allow for a comparison to the previous explanations of a constructivist approach to civics education and the aspects noted for evaluation. From reading the curriculum document alone, one would be led to believe that this course was based at least to some degree on a constructivist approach. In introducing the course, the MOE describes its main objectives as exploring what it means for someone to be an informed and participatory citizen in a democratic society. Further, the document describes that students will learn about elements of democracy in local, national and global

⁵⁵ Lewis, 2009

contexts; will explore their own and other's ideas about civics and will think critically about public issues and react to them.⁵⁶ A quick look back at what a constructivist model of civics entails reminds us that it would include elements such as teaching and learning in a collaborative, issues based, participatory and interactive environment, as well as having students involved in active processes that engage them with civics.⁵⁷ From the introduction alone, the Ontario civics model seems to have a few goals for instruction based on a participatory approach.

Going more in depth, the curriculum divides civics into three component parts: informed, purposeful and active citizenship. Informed citizenship contains many tenants that would positively contribute to the political and civic knowledge of students, specifically that it calls for students to be able to "explain the legal rights and responsibilities associated with Canadian citizenship"⁵⁸ and understand the main functions and structures of municipal, provincial and federal levels of government. As well as to demonstrate that they understand the process of electing governments in Canada, describe the role of political parties in the context of the parliamentary process and minority or majority government situations.⁵⁹ Clearly, these are all aspects that can be understood as contributing to the valuable knowledge that young people today have been shown to lack. Informed citizenship would seem to contribute to someone being an effective participatory citizen as previously defined by Westheimer and have more than the bare minimum of political knowledge needed to be an informed voter.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Education, 2005

⁵⁷ Hughes & Sears, *Citizenship Education: Canada Dabbles While the World Plays On*, 2006

⁵⁸ Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 65

⁵⁹ Ministry of Education, 2005

Purposeful citizenship contributes further to the civic and political knowledge of the student through a strong focus on citizenship, both global and in the Canadian context. This part of the course seems to aim to give students a strong understanding of the concepts that democracy is rooted in. The main goal of purposeful citizenship appears to be a desire that students will be able to explain and describe some of the fundamental aspects and beliefs of democratic citizenship. As well as “compare the varied beliefs, values, and points of view of Canadian citizens on issues of public interest (e.g., freedom of information, censorship, healthcare funding, taxation...).”⁶⁰ Purposeful citizenship could further increase the knowledge base of students, but also potentially build their external political efficacy in light of having a better understanding of how the governmental institutions that deal with these issues respond to their needs.

Finally, active citizenship, which seems to be the most closely linked to constructivist ideas of education in that it addresses the call for students to participate in public debates on contentious issues where there are different ideologies and points of view present. Looking to the curriculum, we see it would encourage students to apply inquiry skills to the research of issues and questions of civic importance, while demonstrating that they understand how citizens participate and engage with civic issues. This echoes Westheimer’s ‘more acts equals more facts’ argument as he also sees engaging with the issues as highly relevant to successfully learning about civics.

⁶⁰ Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 67

It is in this section of the curriculum that the idea of service learning also appears through the expectation that students will have applied their knowledge of the civic realm to a project of personal interest and civic importance, such as volunteering with food or clothing drives or participating in groups advocating for human rights and anti-discrimination policies. Active citizenship also seems to aim to build the critical thinking and assessment skills that have been described as being so important to helping youth engage meaningfully. Specific skills related to critical thinking are described in the curriculum as the ability to:

Formulate appropriate questions for inquiry and research, identify main ideas, supporting evidence, points of views and biases [and] communicate the results of inquiries into important civic issues using a variety of forms (e.g., discussion and debates, posters, letter to elected officials...).⁶¹

These various aspects of the curriculum would contribute to building the internal efficacy of students through allowing them to practice skills in the classroom such as formulating ideas, questions and debating and researching them amongst their peers before attempting the same behavior in a real-world situation. Further, due to the emphasis on independent inquiry and assessment, this aspect of the curriculum would appear to reflect an attempt to promote Westheimer's justice-oriented citizen through the questioning and application of independent ideas.

Overall, after looking at the key elements of the curriculum, it would seem that it aims to teach students valuable skills and knowledge in a quasi-constructivist manner. The curriculum incorporates a number of valuable principles of

⁶¹ Ministry of Education, 2005, p.69

constructivist and participatory civics education classes such as encouraging discussion and debate; incorporating service learning; focusing on interacting with government structures and it can be said to teach for a number of the types of citizens in Westheimer's typology. However, when we turn to a study the classes in a practical sense, it is found that they suffered setbacks during the implementation phase.

Civics Education in the Classroom in Ontario: Where Barriers Emerge

Returning to the research conducted by Lewis, who surveyed a large sample of civics teachers across Ontario, we find that there were problems with regard to the administration and manner that the provincial government introduced the courses. Lewis characterizes the creation of a civics course by the MOE as symbolically stressing the importance of this type of knowledge, but having done so without providing proper resources or the conditions for success.⁶² The actions of the MOE and how different groups such as teachers, administrators and students reacted to them present an interesting case. We will now look at how failure to provide some of the conditions for success that were necessary (yet seemingly plausible), the MOE inadvertently created some barriers to the success of civics before the first student even sat in class.

In terms of specific actions by government (the MOE), through interviews conducted with teachers, Lewis reports that when the course was introduced, there was no advance preparation available for teachers. The course documents came out

⁶² Lewis, 2009

during the same semester the course was introduced with few resources for teachers. Many also had the sentiment that it had simply arrived on their doorstep. This is an area that with a better implementation strategy and a more concerted effort to gain support from teachers, this particular barrier may not have played such a role. Howe concurs and points out that one of the problems with the course included a “lack of curriculum materials for teachers, the absence of clear teaching objectives and a failure to provide adequate training for teachers.”⁶³ Milner furthers this argument by explaining that the MOE introduced the course with little fanfare or support and there was also little “concerted effort on the part of education administrators at the provincial, board and school levels to successfully implement the new program.”⁶⁴

When the civics course was put into practice in the early stages, teachers expressed many concerns about it. Concerns ranged from the length being too short, to students being too young and that the classes were open to all levels of learning. In Ontario, civics is taught at the grade 10 level (or age 14/15) and as one of the critiques of teachers they cited students had little knowledge or interest in the subject at that age.⁶⁵ Teachers also noted the courses were too short, something that Stephen Young of the *Civics Education Network* (Ontario) notes as a main challenge of the program. “This is a ridiculously small amount of time to present three levels of government, the justice system, the Charter of Rights and community activism in

⁶³ Howe, *Engendering Engagement Among Young Canadians: A Holisitic Approach*, 2008

⁶⁴ Milner, *Does Civic Education Boost Turnout?*, 2009, p. 193

⁶⁵ Lewis, 2009

any exciting, enriching manner.”⁶⁶ Moreover, many teachers also report that they have low political literacy and an aversion to teaching civics, as it is perceived to be dry and difficult to teach.⁶⁷ With the MOE not providing resources or ample time for teachers to familiarize themselves with the material, they may have contributed further to this aversion for teaching civics.

Sadly, civics classes in Ontario have also become a timetable ‘dumping ground’ where principals would assign the course to new and unqualified teachers (such as those without any social sciences training). In some cases it was reported that physical education teachers were teaching civics.⁶⁸ The courses also have a bad reputation among students and teachers across Ontario. Stephen Young explains:

The schools themselves perpetuate this [bad reputation], often putting new, inexperienced or uninterested teachers into the course. These teachers then teach to the text, often focusing on the federal government and formal structures, not making any effort to inspire and motivate their students.⁶⁹

The introduction of civics classes may have come without sufficient consideration to the teaching resources present at the time in schools. More consideration to proper teaching resources and training may have led to greater acceptance and fewer barriers to success from teachers and administrators. Although the curriculum was noted to allow a broad range of different topics and flexibility, this sort of differentiation is noted as only useful when trained and qualified teachers in that field are at the helm.

⁶⁶ Samara Canada, 2012

⁶⁷ Milner, *The Internet Generation*, 2010

⁶⁸ Lewis, 2009

⁶⁹ Samara Canada, 2012

While on the surface it may seem teachers do not like the idea of civics education, most in the Lewis study reported they supported the idea⁷⁰ and the Canadian Teachers' Federation also reports that 75 % of teachers support the idea that "the role of public education is to provide a well-balanced general education to prepare children for life and to assume the responsibilities of good citizenship,"⁷¹ with this goal being accomplished through civics classes. There exists a culture within teaching to embrace civics, but as Hughes and Sears point out, when teachers are treated as consumers of course material and not co-authors, this "results in a lack of understanding of and commitment to the goals and often hinders effective implementation."⁷² This observation idealistically points to higher levels of engagement with teachers in the curriculum preparation phase. However, the same acceptance may have been achieved with prior notice that the course was to be taught and more resources for teachers to familiarize themselves with the material.

Furthermore, for the 2003-2004 academic year or the fourth year for civics, the course was revised by the MOE, which resulted in expectations of student's civic knowledge being greatly reduced. Lewis' study talked to a former member of the original curriculum writing team who was very critical of the changes made in 2003-2004 and held that, "You could be a corpse and pass it, it's not hard."⁷³ Given this evidence, it would seem that the provincial government's commitment to civics education was not overly strong at all. This low level of interest in student's success

⁷⁰ Lewis, 2009

⁷¹ Hughes & Sears, *The Struggle for Citizenship Education in Canada: The Centre Cannot Hold*, 2008, p. 126

⁷² Hughes & Sears, *Citizenship Education: Canada Dabbles While the World Plays On*, 2006, p. 131

⁷³ Lewis, 2009, p. 33

by the MOE carried on down the chain into the schools and the classroom where teachers who felt further burdened by the new course reinforced these sentiments.⁷⁴ In summary, the lack of success of civics in Ontario could be attributed to the manner in which it was introduced by the MOE, along with the resentment and pressure felt by the teachers. However, there are other factors that could have been at play and are common to the instruction of civics around the world.

The Politics of Civics Education as a Barrier to Success

To begin, public support for civics is not part of what is holding these programs back. In fact, there is broad public support as some 83% of Canadians surveyed reported that schools should do more to educate children about the benefits of voting and political participation.⁷⁵ However, through studying civics education across North America and abroad, Westheimer has identified what he terms 'the politics of civics education' as a common barrier to success. From his standpoint engaging students with politics in the classroom teaches them a way that people from different backgrounds come together to solve problems and create new ideas of common value.⁷⁶ He explains that politics can then be seen as a manner for people of different interests and opinions to clarify where these values conflict.⁷⁷

Connecting this concept to the earlier discussion of participatory civics, this would allow students learn and practice valuable critical thinking skills and develop the capacity to apply them later in life, outside of the classroom. He explains the

⁷⁴ Milner, Does Civic Education Boost Turnout?, 2009

⁷⁵ Pammett & LeDuc, 2003

⁷⁶ Westheimer, Introduction - The Politics of Civic Education, 2004

⁷⁷ Westheimer, Introduction - The Politics of Civic Education, 2004

controversy of teaching politics by means of examples of teachers being disciplined for encouraging debate in the classroom. In one case in New Mexico, five teachers faced disciplinary action, either suspension or otherwise, for encouraging discussion about the war in Iraq.⁷⁸ Even though research shows that teaching political conflict has positive impact on engagement, the current focus is clearly put on teaching civics without the political aspect due to pressures from administrators and parents. Although, anecdotally speaking these sorts of situations might be less common in Canada, this example nonetheless illustrates the sort of situation that educators find themselves in when they teach politics using a participatory approach.

The politics of civic education, along with the different conceptions of ‘the good citizen’ discussed earlier and the very open ended Ontario curriculum has left teachers with a difficult role to play. This lack of focus has put civics education in Ontario in an unlikely position to succeed and left the current status of Ontario civics education fairly clear: it is not all the curriculum makes it out to be, teachers are unhappy with it and students are not learning the information in the best manner. Meaning that this particular civics course is not greatly contributing to the generally accepted goal for civics education worldwide –to teach young people about the civic and political world so they have the knowledge necessary to engage and interact with it in the years to come.

Given the low levels of youth engagement, knowledge and literacy, and that there is a recognized approach to ameliorate the situation used by similar jurisdictions, why have some Canadian provinces fallen into a situation of symbolic

⁷⁸ Westheimer, Introduction - The Politics of Civic Education, 2004

support for civics education? In seeking to delve into this answer, examining some aspects of the policy cycle, namely agenda setting and looking back at the landscape during the time of the introduction of civics in Ontario might shed some light on how the classes came about, and why they have largely been allowed to flounder.

The Policy Cycle and Agenda Setting: How Ontario Arrived at Civics Education

The policy cycle can be a long and drawn out process, however in order to make sense of civics education ending up on the government's radar in Ontario, it must be understood that education reform was a priority at the time. When the newly elected NDP government created the Royal Commission on Learning (the Commission) in 1990 they made it clear they believed in the need for changes to education in Ontario. "The Government of Ontario, in support of its commitment to economic renewal and social justice, has identified the need to set new directions in education to ensure that Ontario youth are well-prepared for the challenges of the 21st century."⁷⁹ We will examine where the motivation for creating the Commission might have originated, according to a number of approaches to agenda setting, and how the Commission facilitated the emergence of civics education. This will be undertaken by following education's appearance as an item on the policy agenda and some factors explaining the difficulty in the implementation processes as described in *Studying Public Policy* (2009).

Finding Education on Ontario's Policy Agenda

⁷⁹ Royal Commission on Learning, 1995

As governments face an extraordinary number of demands for their limited resources, how and why some issues make it onto the government agenda and others do not is a perennial question. Agenda setting is defined as the first and most critical stage in the policy cycle, where problems can emerge and government must decide whether it wants to act or not.⁸⁰ In the case of civics education in Ontario, it was helped along by the fact that education reform in general was already on the table in the early 1990's. Education became a crucial part of the NDP government's agenda as soon as they launched the Commission shortly after being elected. However it is unclear what drove the government of the day to take such a step and launch the Commission to begin with. As Howlett, Ramesh and Perl describe, there are a number of patterns or modes that emerge when looking to agenda setting and several of which relate to the situation of education in Ontario.

Looking to the role of the systematic or informal public agenda and how it works to become a part of the institutional or formal government agenda provides a basic framework for this discussion on agenda setting. A systematic issue is one that is "commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention and as involving matters within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing government authority".⁸¹ As a matter of provincial jurisdiction and societal importance across Canada, education meets these criteria.⁸² A shift from the systematic agenda to the institutional agenda happens when government accepts that something actually needs to be done about the issue in question. Concerning

⁸⁰ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009

⁸¹ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009, p. 101

⁸² The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2012

education in Ontario, it made shift from the systematic to the institutional agenda that we can trace through the creation of the Commission, yet the specific reasons for the shift remain unclear.

As explained in *Studying Public Policy*, there are four phases as issues make this transition: the issue is initiated, solutions are specified, overall support for the issue is expanded and then based on its success through these phases, it then enters the institutional agenda.⁸³ How exactly the issue of education became seen as sufficiently pressing as to enter the institutional agenda is unclear, though one possibility considered common in liberal pluralist societies is the *outside initiation model*. Here, the power of nongovernmental groups is recognized through their ability to bring an issue into the systematic agenda and continue to advance it until it reaches the point of the institutional agenda.⁸⁴ This model could have played a role in advancing education to the institutional agenda in that parents and teachers group were likely frustrated by the series of failed reforms that took place in the 1980s.

Looking to the prior government's largely failed attempts at reform, we see that this would have stirred public concern and also grabbed the attention of teachers across the province.⁸⁵ Yet as the issues stemmed from government action, or in this instance inaction it would have served the purpose of initiating education as an issue for the new government, offering a starting point for solutions and allowing it to gain support through the groups already mobilized by previous attempts at

⁸³ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009

⁸⁴ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009

⁸⁵ Royal Commission on Learning, 1995

reform. Specifically, what caused education to reach the institutional agenda is not of the utmost importance in this instance given that we are more interest in the policy process that followed and the discussions of civics.

However, it can be observed that the NDP government recognized education reform was an issue, but was not sure what the problems were and what action to take, this is why the Commission was formed. As one of the commissioners reflects, "The reason we were created was because the government didn't know what to do with education, so why should the five of us know? Well, we had to find out, and in the end we produced a unanimous report."⁸⁶ This report, *For the Love of Learning* was released in early 1995⁸⁷ and will be used to help understand the policy window that briefly opened for civics education along with how the civics classes were impacted by the level of attention they were accorded. As well, where policy went from there guided by the new government's discussion paper on education reform produced in 1998.

Opening a Policy Window for Education Reform

A policy window, as explained by John Kingdon, is when actors both inside and outside of government work to bring issues onto the government or institutional agenda. This model also suggests that the windows can open and close based on the dynamic relationship between political institutions, policy actors, and the range and diversity of proposed policy solutions.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Kingdon explains how three different streams (the *problem*, *policy* and *political*) interact and can come together

⁸⁶ Schriever, 2004

⁸⁷ Ministry of Education - Ontario, 2006

⁸⁸ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009

to influence the opening of a policy window. These three streams seem to have been active when education's future being considered in Ontario and could have helped open that policy window.

The *problem* stream is similar to the concept of the public agenda in that these are both describing problems that the public considers as needing government attention and as previously identified, the public places great importance on the role of education in Canada. The *policy* stream is made up of experts who study problems and propose solutions to them. In the case of Ontario, as the former commissioner stated, the government knew that there were issues, but they did not know what the appropriate policy response was. Throughout the 1980's, there were a number of secondary education reform committees appointed in Ontario to respond to the public concern (emanating from the problem stream) for education. However, they are cited and criticized as having offered solutions characterized as being cyclical and therefore unsuccessful in nature.⁸⁹

Finally, the *political* stream, which is comprised of factors such as swings in public mood, administrative or legislative change and interest groups campaigns. In Ontario just prior to the commission being introduced, there was a change in government as the NDP and Bob Rae came into power in 1990. Kingdon contends that these three streams operate separately of each other until the point in time when they intersect and result in a policy window opening for the subject at hand.⁹⁰ If we consider that in the case of education in Ontario, all three aspects seem to have been operating at the same time and came together to open a policy window.

⁸⁹ Royal Commission on Learning, 1995

⁹⁰ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009

Specifically, education at large in Ontario was in the problem stream and had been for some time, but due to the change in government in 2000 and factors in the political stream, it transitioned to the institutional agenda where actors in the policy stream offered solutions and in the end created an opportunity for civics education to become policy. Though a complicated sequence of events, this window was opened for education and now turning to the specifics from the Commission's report we will look deeper into how civics education fit into the equation.

Civics Education in the Agenda Setting Equation

With regards to the recommendations made by the Commission that could have led to the creation of a civics education course, there were such no explicit suggestions made, but with reference to Kingdon's typology of policy windows, civics education in Ontario could fit into what is considered a spillover problem window. Considering this explanation, it is understood that civics was drawn into an already open policy window created by recommendations related to career and workplace education.⁹¹ This spillover window comes from numerous recommendations by the Commission in Chapter 9 of their report. Specifically, they recommend that in Ontario, Grade 10 be based on a solid foundation of exposure to numerous work settings and have one 'life skills' credit, with modules in career education and personal finance and management. They cite a belief that students should be given the chance to participate in work and career related learning

⁹¹ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009

activities in and out of school.⁹² With concerns about the future workforce in Ontario, the idea of exposing students to various career paths early on in life was thought to be a good way to help young people to be prepared for the workforce.

Similarly, Recommendation 21 specifically mentions a minimum of 20 hours per year of community service that takes part outside of school, but makes up a mandatory component of the curriculum.⁹³ This concept of community service is often considered a part of a service learning style program, where student engagement with the community seeks to build citizenship, as described earlier in Part 1 of this paper. Based on and in light of the Commission's recommendations, the Ministry of Education and Training (now the MOE) also released a discussion document for secondary schools in Ontario where they laid out some of the potential avenues that they intended to pursue with reforms. It should also be noted that in the time between when the Commission released its recommendations (1995) and the discussion document (1998), the province had elected a new government and one of the commissioners states that "It was my view then and it is my view now that the second he (Progressive Conservative Premier Mike Harris) won the election, our report was not just ignored but actively dissed by him."⁹⁴ The commissioner further explains how they felt as though they were defending their recommendations during the transition in government and that they were not trusted. It is unclear what impact this had on educational reform, but during the transition, ministry officials continued their work on the subject.

⁹² Royal Commission on Learning, 1995

⁹³ Royal Commission on Learning, 1995

⁹⁴ Schriever, 2004

The discussion document served the purpose of setting “out the goals, priorities and requirements, including related options, that the Ministry of Education and Training is proposing will govern the program in secondary schools in Ontario” and also identifies the goal of having students become “independent, productive, and contributing members of society” and “good citizens.”⁹⁵ Essentially, here is the spillover window that allowed for the creation of civics education, as along with career education, both are half-year courses that follow one and other in the grade 10 curriculum.⁹⁶ Although the discussion document lists many different options for secondary school curriculum, the aspects of the spillover window for civics classes appears in number of them and ultimately became part of the curriculum in 2000.

The Implementation Process and the Nature of the Civics ‘Problem’

As previously noted in discussion of Ontario’s failure to implement a successful civics education program, there were substantial issues and barriers that were faced by the Ministry of Education. According to *Studying Public Policy*, the nature of the policy problem and the severity constraints it poses has a lot to do with its success. The nature of any policy problem is described as either tractable or non-tractable and with low or high severity constraints.⁹⁷ Essentially, the policy problem can vary in the degree to which government thinks it can be solved (tractability) and the number of constraints that will be faced in trying to work toward a solution. Applying this to the context of civics education in Ontario, it

⁹⁵ Ministry of Education and Training, 1998

⁹⁶ Ministry of Education - Ontario, 2004

⁹⁷ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009

seems that the government (both officials and the Minister) might have misunderstood the nature of civics education. By looking at the course and resources assigned to civics, they may have thought it to be a tractable problem with low constraints. However, as was explained earlier, there were many constraints or barriers that affected the implementation such as lack of curriculum resources, general teacher dissatisfaction and a low level of importance placed on quality by administrators.

These were not constraints that the MOE seems to have anticipated, as their approach seems more indicative of understanding the constraints to be low, where they would be able to achieve full implementation of their goals. When issues have low constraints, they can be dealt with through new policy tools or instruments,⁹⁸ which is what civics education would have been at the time in Ontario. However, in reality civics education is best understood as a problem with many constraints such as the politics of civics education, teacher preparation and the need for advanced ministerial preparation for the classes. These types of problems are generally dealt with only in a symbolic effort at reaching a solution.⁹⁹ In 2003-2004 when the MOE revised the curriculum of civics and lowered expectations, this could be interpreted as officials realizing that they were in fact dealing with a high constraint problem and switching to a solution that has been demonstrated to be highly symbolic in its nature.

After examining Ontario's civics classes, it seems clear that there exist more than a number of problems. On paper, the curriculum outline for classes seems to be

⁹⁸ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009

⁹⁹ Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009

rooted in a constructivist approach to teaching, but as it has been shown they largely lack adherence to this concept in practice. Lewis sums up the implementation effort of Ontario civics classes by metaphorically describing them as “a seemingly empty vessel always in need of keen pilots (effective teachers)”.¹⁰⁰ This speaks to the low degree of attention paid to the program after initial design and how beyond the normal funding required of any class, they do not receive any additional support.¹⁰¹ With all the evidence that points to young people not being civically or politically knowledgeable, literate or engaged and how a constructivist approach civics education can improve upon this, the civics classes as they are in Ontario can be considered an unsuccessful policy.

A Snapshot of the Nation and the Nonexistent Art of Civics

However, it is not just Ontario that lacks a successful civics program. All across Canada provinces have aspects of their secondary social sciences or history curriculum that contain themes that could be included under the civics umbrella.¹⁰² However, they are not all mandatory, an important aspect of the attempt to build civic and political literacy among young people.

When British Columbia, one of the few other provinces that have formally experimented with civics education in high school, decided not to make their classes mandatory, they experienced disastrous results. Out of around 50,000 grade 11

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, 2009, p. 35

¹⁰¹ Hughes & Sears, *Citizenship Education: Canada Dabbles While the World Plays On*, 2006

¹⁰² Lewis, 2009

students in 2005-06, only 645 were enrolled in civics.¹⁰³ Enrollment this low is not encouraging and it is generally understood that the young people who do take civics courses are already those who possess a degree of interest and knowledge in the topic. As Howe noted about the Ontario civics course, "What makes this initiative especially valuable, in more ways than one, is its compulsory nature."¹⁰⁴ He also describes that benefits to making the course mandatory is that every student, even those who might have avoided civics will in theory at least have a basic grounding in the subject. Overall, after examination of each provinces attempt at civics, Lewis concluded, "The current Canadian civic education regime does not appear to be adequately impacting the attitudes of young Canadians to boost the level of engagement".¹⁰⁵

Speaking further to this, Hughes and Sears write on how Canada has kept pace with the rest of the world in terms of recognizing the value and importance of civics education, however if one looks beyond what the authors call rhetoric toward civics, it is easy to see that there is extraordinarily weak commitment across Canada to civics education. Additionally, it becomes very clear when comparing what other countries and jurisdictions have done in terms of capacity building to support civic education (through professional training and program development) to the largely unfunded nature of provincial programs across Canada that we are behind the curve in this respect.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Lewis, 2009

¹⁰⁴ Howe, Electoral Participation and the Knowledge Deficit, 2003, p.4/5

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, 2009, p.24

¹⁰⁶ Hughes & Sears, Citizenship Education: Canada Dabbles While the World Plays On, 2006

Clearly, the current approach is not succeeding. With that in mind, there are other similar jurisdictions that have implemented civics education with far fewer barriers from the various actors involved. Looking to these jurisdictions for approaches the provinces and Canada at large can borrow and the institutional factors that could help Canadian jurisdictions with civics in the future will be examined in the next and final section.

Part 3: A Way Forward for Civics Education in Canada

This final section seeks to offer a perspective for moving forward with civics education in Canada considering its current status has been shown to lack success. With the understanding that youth civic disengagement, low civic knowledge and literacy is a national problem and that provincial governments have been unsuccessful in creating meaningful and coherent civics programs, I adopt the position that a pan-Canadian approach to civics education is needed if we are to move forward and tackle the knowledge deficit. This will be supported through looking primarily to Australia, a similar Westminster-style federation that has a national civics education program. As well, consideration of the institutions and stakeholder groups that exist within Canada to help facilitate a pan-Canadian civics program will also make up an important part of this argument. Prior to examining the specifics of what a pan-Canadian approach would look like, the constitutional responsibilities for education in each country will be briefly outlined to strengthen the comparison to Australia.

The Constitutional Responsibilities for Education in Canada and Australia

In Canada, educational policy is strictly a provincial responsibility as outlined in the Constitution Act of 1867.¹⁰⁷ Canada is also considered to have one of the most decentralized education systems of all western democracies as our federal government, due to the constitution, has very little to do with the administration of primary and secondary education. The responsibility here falls with the provinces to educate their young people and determine how they wish to do so. However, it should be noted that the federal government does have a substantial role in funding social programs, of which education is one. Nonetheless, Canadian provinces have remained highly protective of their constitutional right to provide education and encroachment from the federal government is not looked upon favorably.

In Australia, education is also constitutionally speaking the responsibility of the second tier of government, in this case six states and two territories as opposed to provinces and territories in Canada. However, despite not having any significant constitutional role, the federal government founded a Department of Education, Science and Training in 1993, now the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.¹⁰⁸ Along with this department, there is also the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs that also involves New Zealand's education departments.¹⁰⁹ It is through these two government bodies that education is coordinated between the national and state/territorial

¹⁰⁷ Department of Justice, 2011

¹⁰⁸ Lykins & Heyneman, 2008

¹⁰⁹ The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2012

governments. These two organizations show a level of cooperation on education unheard of in Canada. What this has enabled is the development of a national civics education program in Australia, which is positively described as a national program mediated through the states.¹¹⁰ An outline of this case will allow for the feasibility of such a program and the recommendations that it be applied in Canada to better understood later in this section.

The Australian Civics and Citizenship Education Experience

It is through the coordination of the state and territorial governments and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) that Australian civics education came about. The program passed through a number of stages before becoming what it is today. It was initiated in the wake of a investigation of Australian citizenship and citizenship education by the Senate in the late 1980's that resulted in many recommendations for changes to school curriculum and teacher preparation. The federal government responded by pointing out aspects of those recommendations that were state responsibilities, but ensuring that they would support the reforms at the national level. The Civics Expert Group, made up of first and second tier government officials and stakeholders, whose report garnered much support from politicians, policy makers and educators at all levels of government, explained these reforms.¹¹¹ This report led to the introduction of the Discovering Democracy program in 1997. Based on the recommendations from the expert group, this program also cited how possessing

¹¹⁰ Davies & Issitt, 2005

¹¹¹ Hughes & Sears, Citizenship Education: Canada Dabbles While the World Plays On, 2006

effective civics and citizenship knowledge was an important part of living in Australia.

In terms of the goals and motivations of this program, they closely align with all previously mentioned civics curricula as they discuss matters of civic knowledge, in that they believe “To be able to participate as active citizens throughout their lives, students need a thorough knowledge and understanding of Australia’s political heritage, democratic processes, government, and judicial system.”¹¹² Also, there are behavioral capacities that are recognized as being important, such as “skills, values and attitudes that are necessary for effective, informed and reflective participation in Australia's democracy.”¹¹³ This program served as the foundation in helping civics education in Australia get off the ground and is still being carried out today.

Not only does the program meet many of the recognized qualities that civics programs worldwide strive for, it has also been designed and implemented in such a manner that it has avoided many of the mistakes made in the Ontario example. In further explaining these, a comparison will be made to some of the shortcomings of the Ontario program and examples of where Australian civics has avoided such missteps.

In looking back to the barriers to success that civics in Ontario faced, one of the more prominent was the apparent lack of resources and planning provided by the MOE. As many teachers in Ontario cited, the civics course seemed to have arrived in the fall with no prior warning and they were provided with little opportunity to familiarize themselves with the material. Hughes and Sears point out

¹¹² Australian Government, 2012

¹¹³ Australian Government, 2012

that teacher development is extremely important as skillful professionals are needed to properly teach the material. They also mention how teacher development is specifically recognized as being crucial in citizenship or civics education programs around the world, pointing to the fact that Australia's Discovering Democracy program has substantial professional development components that far surpass that of Ontario's.¹¹⁴ These professional development programs are run by the DEEWR and consist of an extensive amount of online resources including strategies for teaching democratic values, case studies, student activities and a liaison officer in each state and territory who is responsible for organizing further development days for teachers to attend or be delivered at the request of the school.¹¹⁵ Programs similar to this may alleviate some of the aversion of Ontario teachers have to teaching civics. As many teachers often report low levels of civic literacy as the source for their aversion, development programs such as those in place in Australia are sure to be beneficial.

In addition, the Australia Electoral Commission also provides substantial support to the civics education process in Australia through initiatives focused on the electoral process. These include producing more teacher resources, running electoral centers that 100,000 students visit annually and targeting post-secondary students during institutional orientation weeks in order to get them registered to vote.¹¹⁶ Other desirable features of the Australian example include the low administrative costs of developing the program and the assessment regime created

¹¹⁴ Hughes & Sears, *The Struggle for Citizenship Education in Canada: The Centre Cannot Hold*, 2008

¹¹⁵ Australian Government, 2012

¹¹⁶ Howe, *Electoral Participation of Young Canadians - Working Paper*, 2007

to ensure symmetry in teaching and quality across states and territories. In Australia's case, their substantial, well-developed and supported *Discovering Democracy* program was developed at a cost of 32 million Australian dollars.¹¹⁷ They have also introduced a mechanism to monitor the success of their initiative over time. The *National Assessment in Civics and Citizenship* was introduced in 2004 and takes place every three years, testing those aged 11-12 and 15-16 respectively. The rationale behind the assessment is to measure the success of the national goals agreed to by all levels of government prior to civics classes being implemented, which is carried on today. Specifically, the national goals are that students leave school as "active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life."¹¹⁸ Such a testing regime would be similar to any other provincial testing program that currently takes place across Canada and given that these are generally held in high esteem, adopting this practice for civics in Canada appears worthwhile.

Civics education in Australia is clearly light-years ahead of any programs in Canada, but with the level of cooperation that governments there have been able to achieve, it is clear that they have been able to place their jurisdictional concerns behind that of the civic knowledge, literacy and informed participation of their young people. Through this cooperation they have also leveraged increased funding for civics education programs and the supports that have followed, something Canada may also hope for with a pan-Canadian approach. Such cooperation in Canada may seem far-fetched at best, however there is awareness of the potential

¹¹⁷ Hughes & Sears, *Citizenship Education: Canada Dabbles While the World Plays On*, 2006

¹¹⁸ Australian Government, 2012

for a federal role in civics and citizenship, along with recognition of the institutional capacity to facilitate the shift through such organizations as the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC). CMEC was founded in 1967 as a forum for provincial ministers of education to meet and discuss policy and issues of mutual interest.¹¹⁹

A Pan-Canadian Approach to Civics

Although a very dated recognition of the federal role in civics and citizenship education, the Library of Parliament, Political and Social Affairs Division prepared a report called *Citizenship Education in Canada* in May of 1993. In this report the role of the federal government in civics education was examined. It explained how the federal government does play a role in setting education curriculum guidelines. However, they do play a role directly through some departments in citizenship and civics issues in that they are responsible for promoting citizenship awareness and eliminating barriers to full participation in society. Furthermore, the report looked at some provincial programs and contained a section describing the early efforts in Australia.¹²⁰ All of this to say that the federal government does have a role in civic education and this has been recognized for some time now, unfortunately further reports of this type have not been produced.

Many others have also recognized this need for federal leadership in civics education, citing the lack of progress being made by the provinces in the field. On a number of occasions, Howe has explained his support for the idea of federal leadership in civics. "Others have suggested, and I would agree, that despite

¹¹⁹ Council of Ministers of Education, 2012

¹²⁰ McKenzie, 1993

provincial jurisdiction over education there is a strong case to be made for federal leadership to advance the civics agenda more forcefully,” while recognizing that “The Canadian federal government cannot unilaterally impose itself in this field, but should seek to cooperate with the provinces to establish civics education as a genuine priority in schools throughout the country.”¹²¹ Howe is not alone in thinking that in order for civics education in Canada to catch up with the rest of the world federal involvement is necessary. He bases this on that it would help to jumpstart the process, help to coordinate the efforts across jurisdictions and potentially provide resources for effective civics instruction.¹²²

In a report prepared by the Canadian Policy Research Network, the idea of a civics program sponsored by the federal government in a collaborative manner with the provinces, CMEC and other civil society and community groups have acknowledged their support. They believe “The federal government has a crucial role to play in helping to define and elaborate the meaning of citizenship [education] and in collaborating with the provinces/territories on a framework and strategy.”¹²³ In their final report, the Canadian Council on Learning also argued that civics and citizenship education at the national level should be a priority. They further cite that these classes should include such topics as civic participation in a democratic society and responsible international participation.¹²⁴

They also identify some of the barriers that have previously been discussed such as what model of citizen and citizenship should be taught and see the

¹²¹ Howe, *Engendering Engagement Among Young Canadians: A Holisitic Approach*, 2008

¹²² Howe, *Engendering Engagement Among Young Canadians: A Holisitic Approach*, 2008

¹²³ MacKinnon, Pitre, & Watling, 2007

¹²⁴ Canadian Council on Learning, 2011

collaboration and discussion between all of the various actors as a chance to clarify and outline which direction this program should go. There are also other barriers to a pan-Canadian approach to civics worth acknowledging. Consider the role that Quebec would need to play in the development of any pan-Canadian civics program. The deeply rooted historical and cultural differences that exist between many in Quebec and the rest of the country have led McDonough to characterize approaches to civics dealing with such issues as having multinational civics education needs.¹²⁵ This means that while a majority of the citizens identify with the federal nation (Canada), there is also a minority of citizens that identify more strongly with a minority nation (Quebec).¹²⁶ In the Canadian context, working within the confines of multinational civics needs will inevitably be difficult, but possible. Clearly there is support from academics and other actors for a pan-Canadian approach to civics, but in order for such a program to get off the ground, CMEC must agree to play a large role in getting all of these actors to the table and mediating process.

The Role of CMEC in Pan-Canadian Civics

Although CMEC may not possess the institutional capacity to develop a pan-Canadian civics program on their own, they would be able to play the key role of facilitator between the provinces and the federal department(s) who sponsor civics. As mentioned by many who advocate for pan-Canadian civics, this is exactly the role they envision for CMEC. Howe believes that in order for such a program to succeed,

¹²⁵ McDonough, 2003

¹²⁶ McDonough, 2003

it needs to be facilitated by CMEC.¹²⁷ It is also well within their mandate to act as such, as their own mission statement describes the organization as a intergovernmental body formed by ministers of education to act as a forum for discussion of policy issues; a facilitator of projects, initiatives and activities of mutual interest and a means to cooperate and consult with the federal government and national education organizations.¹²⁸ In a report examining the relationships and complexities of education in Canada, Lykins and Heyneman point to work being done by CMEC in recent years to close gaps in educational attainment between aboriginal and non aboriginal students; strengthening ties between local, provincial and federal agencies and measuring student attainment across the nation.¹²⁹

In the context of civics education, this cooperation would see all members of CMEC, other stakeholders and civil society groups that work in the areas and the federal government (through Canadian Heritage and possibly Elections Canada) form a pan-Canadian working group to collaborate on program design. Putting aside the difficulty of attaining agreement from the provinces to even join such a working group that involves education and the federal government, there is at least some precedent for the provinces working together when it comes to education policy. As Lewis points out, the Atlantic provinces have agreed on a regional curriculum for a number of subjects and four western provinces and two territories have agreed on what is called the Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic

¹²⁷ Howe, *Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians*, 2010

¹²⁸ Council of Ministers of Education, 2012

¹²⁹ Lykins & Heyneman, 2008

Education.¹³⁰ Such collaboration could be taken further to incorporate the rest of the provinces and territories, Elections Canada, Canadian Heritage, provincial electoral agencies and departments of education.

In short, in order to develop a pan-Canadian civics education program the following must take place: each province and territory must agree to have their ministers of education sit at a table with representatives from their respective electoral agencies, the Department of Canadian Heritage, Elections Canada, representatives from CMEC and concerned stakeholders in order to form a working group for developing a curriculum, guidelines and mandate for pan-Canadian civics education classes.

Conclusion

Low levels of youth engagement across Canada are cause for concern as they have the potential to bring about great challenges for the future of Canadian democracy. With today's generation of young people being less knowledgeable than the generations before them, circumstances have clearly changed and require government action. Civics education is a logical manner in which to tackle the low levels of youth civic engagement, civic knowledge and political literacy. Engaging youth in an interactive manner with the institutions and fundamental actors of democracy is key to its success. Such an approach exists on paper in a number of Canadian jurisdictions, but across the country civics is largely a poorly practiced art.

¹³⁰ Lewis, 2009

In Ontario, civics education for grade 10 students has been shown to meet accepted standards of constructivist approaches to teaching on paper, but lacks success in the implementation phase. The less than desirable outcomes of the Ontario classes can be attributed to the low level of resources and by extension, the low priority placed on civics education by successive Ontario governments. This led to many different barriers to success emerging that challenged teachers and administrators to make civics work with the resources provided to them. Across Canada the picture is the same, low levels of priority and resources are afforded to civics education and for an issue with national importance, further action is needed. It is in this instance where many in the field suggest the possibility of a pan-Canadian approach to civics education as offering the best solution. As demonstrated through the short case study of Australia, a pan-Canadian approach has the potential to succeed if federal and provincial governments along with stakeholder groups such as CMEC are willing to cooperate and work together. In the end, implementing a serious civics education platform for Canada would be no small task, but with the challenge of low civic engagement, knowledge and literacy is also not a small problem. If this generation is to take the reins anytime soon, there could be substantial cause for concern with regard to the level of participation in Canadian democracy in the years to come.

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