

inspiring CITIZENSHIP:
Ontario's Careers/Civics Curriculum

a report of the
Ontario Student Trustees' Association

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This paper is the culmination of a two-year's discussion amongst Ontario's student trustees, organised by:

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Authorship

This essay is a result of the vision of authors Jonathan Scott and Nils Lau. Chris Radojewski, Nupur Dogra and Nadia Timperio compiled research.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to our parents, our very world's first teachers, who taught us to be who we are.



A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

It is my great pleasure to present to you the twelfth publication of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association - l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario (OSTA-AÉCO), titled "Inspiring Citizenship: Ontario's Careers/Civics Curriculum".

This publication is the culmination of over a year's work in research and collaboration on the part of student leaders from across Ontario. It seeks to celebrate the past years that the civics and careers curriculum has existed in the province while also challenging the system to do more.

As the only province in Canada that has a recognized curriculum devoted to civic education, we commend the education system for responding to the need to nurture active, engaged citizens of tomorrow, today. However, while implementation is one matter, delivery is another – and the two must go hand-in-hand.

With 51% of Canadians believing that the Prime Minister is directly elected by voters and a staggering 75% thinking that the Prime Minister is Canada's Head of State, according to an Ipsos Reid poll conducted earlier this year, the need to revamp our civics education curriculum is more urgent now than ever. Our careers curriculum is also lacking in true substance and propulsive, hands-on opportunities. These statistics, combined with the fact that more and more young people are coming out of school unsure of which career path to take, raises many concerns on what the current system is doing – and more importantly, not doing.

Whether you are a fellow student, policy maker, or stakeholder in education, I hope this publication inspires some constructive dialogue on how to best deliver the civics and careers curriculum Ontario students deserve.

Yours in education,

Gorick Ng
President

“We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can
build our youth for the future.”

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Introduction

“Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life. To make this a living force and bring it clear consciousness is perhaps the foremost task of education,” wrote Albert Einstein. These words, from the mind of a man who shunned his own primary education, provoke a discussion of the role schools play in raising children of character and how to do it most effectively.

The consensus in education is that schools must educate citizens. The education community is discussing “the role of schools in creating the Canada we want”. The way forward is simple: to raise citizens of character, we must teach conscientious, active citizenship. Civics and careers education must be one in the same, holding one purpose: to form not only citizens of Canada, but also citizens of the world.

In a democracy, civic education is not merely desirable - it is vital. It is not merely permissible - it should and must be encouraged. President Obama may have said it best: “The future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens”¹. Schools are not isolated islands but instead are the very cradle of our society. Our education system was created for the very purpose of raising its citizens. Citizenship requires certain foundational values, chief amongst which is the principle of freedom of thought, which underpins all other values. Schools must teach values - through both civics and character education – but the framework for this learning should be, in the phrasing of Annie Kidder, “a conversation across differences”.²

The role of schools is to uphold the basic ethical and civic obligations of our liberal democracy, but to remain true to this very goal schools must foster free inquiry and debate. If this is the answer to the first question, the query as to how to best fulfil this goal remains. The answer, the focus of this paper influenced by students across Ontario, is that schools should challenge students to think for themselves. Civics and careers education must, then, be experiential and conceptual. Civics and careers are things to be lived, not studied to death. Active citizenship comes from the individual interacting with society. The classroom can be the paradigm society – a place where people are free to explore their talents and to learn from the example of others.

Rather than sitting in a classroom memorising dates, we need a hands-on curriculum. Volunteering at soup kitchens, organizing principled protests, participating in leadership activities and garbage clean ups – are the lessons which will pave the way to foster a new path of responsibility in our students. Democracy is not just a concept or an historical fact; it is a way of life.

¹ Obama, Barack. “Remarks to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce”. Washington, D.C. 10 March 2009. Accessed online from <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/10/us/politics/10text-obama.html>>.

² Murray, Glen, et al. “Building a New Canada Together: The role of schools in creating the Canada we want”. Panel Discussion, Toronto, ON. 27 October 2009. Accessed online <<http://www.ceace.ca/dia.cfm?subsection=aut&page=08>>.

The future of our education is like the future of our new economy; it requires us to harness creativity. Again, Einstein had it right: “all true learning is experience. Everything else is just information”. We need to stop educating rote memory and start educating the imagination.

Problems

Currently, Ontario has a half-credit, grade-ten course for each civics and careers. The course is grouped within the Canadian and World Studies department and is labelled as an “open course”, allowing students of all academic levels to learn in the same classroom. Created under the government of former Premier Harris, the civics course was designed to inform youth about how politics, government, and how the judicial system works to combat apathy in young people.

The civics course itself delineates between three strands of citizenship: “informed citizenship”, which defines the mechanics and institutions for global citizenship; “purposeful citizenship”, which focuses on analysis of civic issues at the local, national and international levels; and “active citizenship”, which attempts to engage students’ inquiry skills toward solving conflicts in contemporary politics.³

The civics course is paired with careers, an introduction to résumé writing, interview skills and employment opportunities. This half-credit course, designed to introduce post-secondary learning and career opportunities, helps students prepare for future “work and life transitions” by identifying their individual skills, characteristics, and goals.

In a survey of students from both public and Catholic school boards, some 74% of students considered the separate courses less important than their other courses; several students even commented that the course was “a waste of time”⁴.

Schools often add to students’ lack of respect for the civics and careers separate course by the rotation of teachers - often younger and less experienced – throughout the semester to teach either strand of the course. Indeed, students confirmed this process as detrimental, with one survey respondent suggesting that “[he] found that when [he] was in the course the teacher treated it as though it was not necessary. [He felt] as though the teachers should be better assessed for teaching the courses.”⁵ Consensus amongst students is that the course is unimportant, something to be endured.

³ Ministry of Education. “The Ontario Curriculum Exemplars for Grade 10: Canadian and World Studies, Civics”. Queen’s Printer for Ontario: Toronto, 2002, p. 12.

⁴ Lau, Nils. “Student Perspectives on Civics Education: Memo to the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association (OSTA-AECO) Policy Committee” (unpublished): 8 June 2009.

⁵ Ibid, 2.

Perhaps tellingly, statistics show the course to have a biased pass-fail rate: students either ace the course or fail it. Some students believe their grade in the course was merely a result of attendance; one student suggested, “If you came to class and could spell and turn in assignments, [a] 100% [grade] was really possible”⁶. This inconsistency presents itself not only in assessment but also in the material that is taught. Some students are provided with a wide array of resources and options, while others are presented with a very limited spectrum, creating a wide gap between classrooms across the province.

Perhaps more striking, organisations like Apathy is Boring and the Historica-Dominion Institute confirm that youth are still disengaged from the political process and fail to demonstrate comprehensive understanding of citizenship. This is perhaps best captured by one student who said, “the careers curriculum failed to provide any insight into future careers and the civics curriculum proved to be less engaging than any other course [in high school]”⁷.

The declining interest in civics and careers poses a risk to the value and veracity of a prosperous Canadian society and its democratic process. Educating citizens requires a better framework than what the current hybrid course offers.

Solutions

Dr. Ben Levin, Ontario’s Deputy Minister of Education, argued for the need to distinguish between education *about* citizenship and education *for* citizenship. This seemingly subtle distinction becomes clear as he goes on to suggest that “Learning about political participation seems hollow if one is unable to exercise political participation” and “youth’s natural vitality, idealism, and optimism are not sufficiently connected to educational ends... democracy in schools must itself be educational”⁸.

Moreover, Frank Kelly and Pauline Liang argued in an edition of *Education Canada* “that more important preparation for citizenship takes place within the social environment of the school” because “democracy requires literate, knowledgeable and creative citizens who take responsibility for the public good... when schools allow their students to have a voice in decisions... [this] ultimately leads to a mature form of citizenship”⁹.

Part of civic education includes learning how to play a part in society, including learning about future career options. A focus needs to be placed on aiding students to find their future pathway rather than the traditional pathway simply out of high school. The

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Levin, Ben. “Democracy in Schools”. ed Paula Dunning. *Education Canada*. Fall, 2000: v. 40, n. 3, p. 4-6

⁹ Kelly, Frank and Pauline Liang. “Politics of Curriculum”. ed. Paula Dunning. *Education Canada*. Fall, 2000, v. 40, n. 3, p 40.

careers curriculum needs to be more effective and beneficial to students now, whether it is through a more in depth study of post-secondary education or a more meaningful, personalised study of professions.

Connecting the school society to the greater community is also important. While school has often been viewed as a microcosm of society at large, this disconnect between school and “the real world out there” needs to be addressed. The idea of schools as community centres, including the sharing of school space with community organisations during the day, is an important means of inspiring and educating not only the youth, but also the larger community.¹⁰

This community should ensure inclusion of all students: broadening the involvement in the day-to-day school life of students with special needs, allowing for differentiated learning styles for students in the open course spectrum and challenging youth to model an inclusive society in their schools.

Recommendations

1. The current civics/careers hybrid course should be changed to a single, semester-long course, taught by a single teacher. Integrating both Careers and Civics education into one course, simply entitled “Citizenship”, to better illustrate the connection and importance they share, is also critical.
2. The course should become a prerequisite for grade-eleven law classes to ensure that students who choose to take civics and careers education in their senior years (as opposed to during the grade 10 year) have a comprehensive understanding of citizenship and its importance in the judicial system prior to more advanced courses.
3. The course needs to be more focused on community involvement and outreach so as to allow students to establish a more vivid connection with the practicality of the course.
4. The Ministry of Education needs to collaborate with the Ontario Teachers’ Federation (OTF) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) to mandate and ensure teachers with training in related disciplines instruct the course.
5. The curriculum needs to become more focused and less ambiguous to remove the current inconsistencies that exist throughout the province. Teachers must be able to correctly interpret the resources provided to ensure that equity of learning for students is achieved in all of Ontario.

¹⁰ See: People for Education report, “Ontario’s urban and suburban schools: a prescription for change”, 2009

6. A greater focus must be placed on post-secondary pathways – trades, workplace, post-secondary education – rather than the current focus on character to career matchmaking through personality and character assessments. Students needed to be provided more information in regards to the options available and requirements for each.

7. More opportunities for professional development must be provided to educators teaching the course to ensure educators remain knowledgeable and engaging on the topic of careers and civics, exemplifying the curriculum through their engagement of students.

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