NO SCHOOL LEFT UNDEMOCRATIC: EXPERIENCING SELF-GOVERNMENT IN A FREE SCHOOL

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Abstract

While schools have been assigned the role of introducing students to our current democratic systems, many have highlighted the paradox of teaching democracy in an undemocratic context (e.g. Biesta, 2007). Alternative models of schools that operate democratically such as free schools (democratic schools in which students and teachers largely have similar rights and obligations) can offer a great deal in terms of democratic education. In this paper, I will talk about the ethnographic study that I conducted about the experiences of Canadian free school students during school meetings (democratic activity during which students with teachers decide on the activities, operations and rules of the school). During this project, I attended 4 school meetings, spent a period of five weeks making observations in a free school and completed 17 interviews about these experiences. Based on this, I maintain that these meetings arose in a school that operated according to a consensus-based model and that students, while attending these meetings, experienced a combination of feelings that mostly included appreciation and concerns while being involved in decision-making processes. As well, I will contend that students, after having taken part in several school meetings, developed skills and attitudes associated to citizenship such as critical thinking and self-confidence. For conventional

schools, this means that providing students with opportunities to take decisions democratically could help to foster such skills and attitudes.

On December 1st 2011, a relative of a friend of mine, Huguette Jaccarini, a woman and an Egyptian citizen, filled out a ballot for the first time along with millions of other Egyptian women to vote for the make-up of their country's government. Such historical moments not only remind us how fragile democracy is, but also how democracy represents a process that needs to be continuously enacted as well as how there remain plenty of places across the world where democracy is not a possibility yet. It is my contention that most of our schools today correspond to such places. For this reason, in this paper, I will argue that free schools and the democratic activities that they support can help to expand the democratic sphere and can benefit the current state of democratic education by highlighting how, during democratic assemblies in free schools, students can become involved from a citizenship perspective and can develop skills associated with citizenship such as critical thinking and forecasting the potential consequences of democratic decisions. To achieve this, I will describe an ethnographic study that I conducted about free school students' experiences during school meetings in a Canadian free school.

I will start by illustrating how this study fills a gap in the literature about both democratic education and free schooling by analyzing selected articles on both topics. Indeed, school systems could gain from exploring alternative models of democratic education in order to tackle the issues as presented in the literature to which they are confronted with respect to democratic education. What are these issues? According to Galston (2004), the present level of civic engagement of young people in North America is alarmingly inferior to that of 40 years ago. To support this argument, he drew on

analysis of longitudinal studies of high school graduates based multiple citizenship markers such as participation in federal elections, protesting and volunteering habits, and beliefs in the importance of following politics. For instance, his study examined how young people's participation in national elections dropped significantly from 50% in the 70s to 33% in 2000. These last numbers are similar to young voters' turnout in the 2004 Canadian federal elections where only 37% of young Canadians voted (Elections Canada, 2005). To describe the Canadian context with respect to this matter, Winton (2008) preferred to talk in terms of civic disengagement.

Looking at the current situation of young people's level of civic engagement, authors such as Galston (2003), Hennessy (2006) and Winton (2008) went as far as claiming that citizenship education is failing in North America. Two elements arising from my analysis of selected studies on the topics accounts for this situation: the space granted to democratic education in conventional schools and the organizational structure of these schools. For instance, Edwards (2010) affirmed that, in a context where the emphasis in education is put on accountability and standardization through policies such as the *No Child Left Behind Act*, very little room is left for subject matters such as democratic education in curricula. Moreover, in situations where democratic education is part of curriculum, notions inherent to democracy are often described in an idealized way. About this issue, Tupper (2009) completed a document analysis of several citizenship-education-related curricula and standardized tests in Western Canada to determine how the concept of citizenship was defined. In her conclusion, she contended that these documents, by presenting citizenship around ideas of equality and universality, where universality implies equal treatment under the law, where incongruent with how several citizens were treated, for instance Islamic Americans in airports or First Nation people in some regions of Canada.

With regard to the organizational structure of schools, Stevenson (2010) suggested, after analyzing scholarship on democratic education, that education needs to fight for its own democratic conditions to give a voice to students. In this fashion, he was echoing Gribble (2004) who highlighted the paradox of teaching about democracy within organizational school structures that are undemocratic. Similarly, Biesta (2007) deconstructed the idea of democratic education as teaching for a future participation in a democracy. In contrast, he advocated for an education where students would not have to wait for a distant future to be active democratically.

Due to the difficulties associated with a democratic education that has a restricted space in curricula and that has to take place in undemocratic settings, we could benefit from exploring alternative models of democratic education. For instance, Engel (2008) depicted the potential of a learning setting guided by self-governance by describing the educational practices of the Children's Republic, a Polish orphan home destroyed during World War II. Free schools also run through self-governance. According to Greenberg (1995) and Neill (1961), two free school founders, free schools form a counter movement to compulsory education within compulsory education. For Neill (1961), the purpose of his institution, Summerhill School, was to lay the foundation for a happy and responsible life for his students. To achieve these goals, the staff of free schools largely possesses the same rights and obligations as students. Fostering responsible individuals presupposes that the responsibility for each person's activities lies with that person, not with someone else in a position of authority (Greenberg, 1995). Thus, students are responsible for their education and their freedom stops where that of others begins (Neill, 1961). In these conditions, attending class is optional, though students must remain on school ground and follow the law. In this setting, self-governance takes place through democratic activities that regulate school life (Greenberg, 1995). These activities include

school meetings. These meetings enable students and teachers to make democratic decisions, each with an equal vote on each matter, about the activities, the conflicts and the rules of the school.

These democratic meetings could possibly help to address many problems inherent to democratic education. However, the literature on the topic is very limited. After several searches on multiple databases such as ERIC and FRANCIS, I have only found a small number of old studies on free schools. For instance, Darling (1992) mentioned that democratic principles were central to the regulation of the social life at Summerhill School and that Neill considered that students' intrinsic motivation should initiate every learning activity (Darling, 1984). Croft and Falusi (1969), investigating a Canadian free school, concluded that free schools affect positively students' mental health due to the absence of coercion in these schools, and illustrated the efficiency of self-studies. Erikson and Fiske (1973) identified collaboration and openness as factors favoring teachers' adaptability to working in a newly founded free school. Swidler (1976) contended that free schools teach group skills as well as nurture self-directedness and a positive perception of school and of learning, while fostering few academic skills. Novak (1974) qualified as anomic the organization of a particular free school while concluding that each free school represents a continuous construction on a daily basis. Betts (1975) concluded that free schools contribute to students' development of a positive perception of themselves, and that free school students have more significant vocational intentions and are more inclined to pursue post-secondary studies. Concurring with Berstein (1968), Grey and Chanoff (1986) claimed that the graduates of a free school had experienced no difficulty in adapting to the demands of traditional higher education and had been successful in a variety of careers.

Therefore, since no study has focused on the potential of school meetings in relation to democratic education and no inquiry was recently carried out about free schools, I tried to understand students' experiences in these school meetings. While most studies on free schools relied on extended

periods of on-site observation and on interviews to generate rich descriptions of various operations of free schools, I chose to conduct an ethnographic case study.

Theoretical Framework

I used three main principles from complexity thinking – the study of complex phenomenon- to frame my inquiry. The notion of emergence is the first principle. It differs from the idea of causality as the concept of emergence assumes that similar individuals (such as students from comparable backgrounds) can react differently to similar conditions and can learn new responses to those conditions (Davis, 2004). As such, these responses are adaptive as they can change. As an example to illustrate the differences between causality and emergence, one can throw a rock on a wall and, after some repetitions, predict the trajectory of the rock. On the other hand, one can throw a rock at someone and still would not be able to predict this person's reaction after many repetitions. The actions of students follow similar patterns. While a group A of students might respond in one way when interacting with/in school meetings, this does not mean that a similar group of students will have the same reaction during school meetings. Despite this, the reactions of both groups of students remain parts of a repertoire of possibilities that can emerge during school meetings. Hence, I will describe the experiences of students that I investigated as possibilities part of this repertoire.

As well, I assumed that students' experiences do not happen in isolation (Davis, 2004). A great deal happens simultaneously at several levels during these experiences. Such experiences occur within larger phenomena, such as the evolution of a society, and can involve smaller phenomena (e.g. perceptual ones). In complexity terms, this is called the nestedness of phenomena (see Figure 1). In the context of my research,

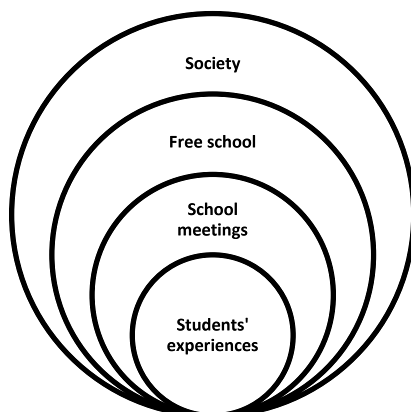

Figure 1 Nestedness

I made the assumption that students' experiences of the school meetings took part within the dynamics of these school meetings and within the operation of the school. I assumed that these dynamics and these operations acted as condition for the emergence of students' experiences of school meetings. Thus, I collected data about the students' experiences during the school meetings, about the school meetings themselves and about the operations of the school. Lastly, I assumed that experiences combined feelings, actions and, potentially, learning. I considered learning as the adaptation of a learner's current repertoire of possible actions (Davis, 2004).

Methodology

Based on these principles, I carried out an ethnographic case study. My research design comprised an ethnographic component because free schools represent a unique school culture. For my data collection, this implied proceeding in-situ (Walford, 2008); that is, in an involvement in the practices of the participants at the school, notably through participant observations and by spending prolonged periods of time in the field. My ethnographic inquiry remained a case study as I focused on one school in order to generate an in-depth description of the experiences (Creswell, 2007).

I conducted my research project at *Canadian Free School* (a pseudonym), an urban Canadian free school attended by 30 students aged between 12 and 15 years old. My data collection took place in 2009 and lasted five intensive weeks. In total, four educators and 18 students participated in my study. To collect data, I spent prolonged periods of time observing both the general activities of the school (classes, informal activities, fieldtrips...) and the school meetings (four sessions in total). As well, I completed 17 interviews with both educators and students. I questioned them about observed and previous school meetings. My questions were mostly open-ended and bore on the rules of the school meetings, on what participants did as a group and individually; that is, how participants felt, what they did and what they changed during school meetings. To analyze my data, I mostly used

participants' words and notions inherent to my conceptual framework and to my literature review to categorize various recurring themes and subthemes relevant to the experiences of students. For instance, when a student said "I do much appreciate them" in relation to the school meetings, I categorized the statement as "feeling of appreciation". Lastly, I divided my themes and subthemes in function of the level of nestedness to which they related (the activities of the school, the school meetings or students' experiences).

The Emergence of Students' Experiences in School Meetings

In this section, I will argue that students, in a school where they enjoyed several freedoms, became largely engaged in decision-making processes while simultaneously experiencing various feelings during school meetings that worked democratically.

The Operations of *Canadian Free School*

The operations of *Canadian Free School* were guided by certain principles. According to Educator 3[1], self-directed learning was one of them:

> The assumption on which [the school] is built is that people actually do want to succeed in life. They don't want to do nothing. They want to be able to help themselves so, if you give them the opportunity to do so, they will move naturally in that direction (...) this is one of the reason why we are pursuing this way.

In the school, this principle meant considering that students would be able to take the necessary steps to reach their goals if left with the responsibility of choosing when, what and how to learn. As an implication for self-directed learning, Educator 3 added:

> The teachers will offer the regular curriculum to the students, but only as an offer, not as something that [students] are forced to do, but [students] will have the opportunity to see what other people of their age would normally see in society so they can decide for themselves if they want to go in that route.

[1] To protect educators' anonymity, I chose to assign a number to each of them. I will use pseudonyms for student participants.

Observations of the school indicated that educators presented optional courses to students derived from the ministerial curriculum as teachers largely allowed students the freedom to do what they wanted with themselves. The classes varied from below to above grade level. In this context, when an educator invited students to take part in a mathematics class, students who elected to participate in other activities did. On one occasion, students including Tom, Dan and Joe played games like chess or cards while a group of students attended the class. Most classes gathered five to ten students.

Educator 3 spoke about the notion of community as a second element that structured the operations of the school:

> Everybody's voice is important to develop a community. Everybody has to put in what they believe to be the right way to do things (...) what is to be considered to be the truth for the school has to be built out of all the perspectives that people have.

Here, the community included educators, parents and students. Educator 3 explained that weekly school meetings and monthly community meetings represented two types of consensus-based democratic activities regulating school life. Hence, school meetings at the school arose from the need the community-building component of the school philosophy.

The Dynamics of School Meetings

A specific set of procedures gave rise to the dynamics of school meetings. The purpose of these meetings was to enable students and educators to take decisions on the activities of the school and on rules to implement. The school meetings occurred every Tuesday at 11h a.m. in the main classroom at a large round table. The four school meetings that I observed lasted between 20 and 50 minutes while most went over the 35-minute schedule and continued past the beginning of the lunch hour. Participation to these meetings is mandatory for everyone in the school. On this topic, Educator 2 declared, “this is a school where you have a lot of freedom, but you have to take a little bit of responsibility for the community.” According to this educator, “There are two students who run

[school meetings].There is the chair and, then, there is what was called the peacekeeper, [this person keeps] the peace.” The roles of chairs and peacekeepers were always played by students. Shannon clarified how the assembly selected the chair and the peacekeeper. She reported, “When there is a boy chair, then, there is a girl peacekeeper so [, at the next meeting,] they have to choose [their successor]. Like a girl would choose a boy.” When questioned about the duties of the chair, Educator 2 responded that:

> The chair starts the meeting by saying, 'who has any agenda items or anything that they want to talk about.' Then, [the chair] writes it down and their name beside it. The first person who speaks on any topic is the person who brought it up and, then, the discussion begins and the chair tries to keep a speakers' list if there are too many hands up. If there are any kinds of votes, [the chair] summarizes what other students have said, the [chair says], 'we are voting for either this or that.

This indicates that, after the election of a chair and of a peacekeeper, the meeting started by the creation of an agenda. Everyone had a right to add an item to this agenda. Every person who added a topic to the agenda would present it to the assembly. After that, everyone could share their opinion on this topic and request a vote if necessary. Each meeting ended when every issue on the agenda had been addressed. During meetings, the peacekeeper could issue some warnings to students and educators who were disrupting the flow of the assembly. People who were given a second warning had to be moved to a different seat. After a third warning, they were expelled from the meeting. Marc explained what such expulsion entailed: “[you] miss opinions being spoken during that time and that is the punishment. You don't get your opinion out on that one topic.”

Various types of atmosphere emerged from these meetings. The dynamics of these meetings varied as well as the performance of peacekeepers. In one of the meetings, the dynamic was very calm. People were raising their hands. During another one, few were talking and laughing while most were looking at and listening to the speakers. The following excerpt from my notes, describing how one item about the death of two school pets was addressed, illustrates how the assembly, as a group,

debated, negotiated, compromised, voted, addressed objections and took decisions during the meetings:

> This discussion started when Ben asked for clarifications about the death of the two class pets, two chicks. Even though everyone who talked during that discussion expressed some interests about the topic and concerns for the death of the animals, many disagreed about the definition of the problem. Abbey and Liz claimed that the chicks had been mistreated. Marc and Patrick asserted that the chicks died of natural causes while some, such as Mia, affirmed that the chicks died because they were overloved being subjected to continuous attention from many students. During that debate, discussions also took place when students shared their disagreements about what to do about the issue. Liz and Abbey claimed that the assembly should create a rule. Other students said that there was no need for a rule. Many, including Paul, Patrick and Dan, declared that the rule should be created at the beginning of the following year because no more pet would be introduced to the class before the end of the school year. A vote in favour of this last suggestion put an end to this discussion.

Other topics that were discussed during the meetings notably involved a fieldtrip to a theme park, the cleaning of the kitchen, the creation of a cooking club, computer use, school rules, couch use, participation in a painting contest and a walk to raise awareness about the socioeconomic situation of children in an African region, a fieldtrip to an organic farm, a camping trip and a relief effort in Haiti.

Students' Experiences during these School Meetings

Here, I will contend that, within the dynamics of the school meetings, students simultaneously experienced a wide range of feelings, became involved in democratic decision-making processes and changed their participation in these meetings, in the school and in their life.

Every interviewed student indicated having mostly felt a combination of feelings that involved appreciation, concerns, a sense of empowerment and boredom on occasions during the meetings. Their appreciation related to different elements of the meetings. For instance, John suggested that he liked the overall operations of the meetings, "They are a great strategy." As another example, Ben put into words one of his interests for what he learned during one meeting, "it was kind of interesting to see why people were vegetarian (...) so that taught me about a lot of people." Furthermore, students were also concerned at times during the meetings. While many were glad to discuss activities and

school clubs during meetings, several were concerned about the decisions affecting their school. As an instance, Paul affirmed that “sometimes, the people don’t know a lot about an issue, about what is going on, both sides of the story, so they do not vote properly.” In some other cases, these concerns regarded the effectiveness of some meetings. In line with this, Patrick stated about a specific meeting, “this time, we finished only two things because this one thing, we talked way too long on, which happens a lot, I find.” In addition to their concerns, students also felt empowered for the most part in the meetings. For instance, Ella, to justify what she had said in an interview that she found meetings interesting, declared “because [people are] in charge.” However, despite having feelings that comprised interests, worries and empowerment, some students suggested being sometimes bored during the meetings. For instance, Donna said that she was bored when “people get on over one topic and they just go on and on about it.”

While largely experiencing this combination of feelings, students engaged in the decision-making processes in several different ways. Some students’ engagement in the meeting started before the actual beginning of the meetings during discussions with classmates or parents. As an instance, according to Ella, when Paul was distressed about the situation of the kitchen, he told her that he was going to put this issue on the agenda of the next meeting. She agreed with him that doing so would be a good idea. During my observations, almost every participant volunteered at one time or another to be either chair or peacekeeper during the meeting. All of them had performed one of those roles during a meeting. Karen described her performance as a chair by saying, “I called up the people who had their hands up to say something, (. . .) read off the topics and checked them off, and usually [tried] to take notes.” Every interviewee mentioned frequently adding topics of discussion to the agenda of the assembly. Congruent with this, Marc claimed, “often, I go along and give a good idea for a topic like if I had thought of a good idea for a field trip or there is a good club idea or something like that

and I do enjoy doing that." Most of students' engagement also entailed thinking about what others were suggesting and arguing before sharing an opinion. As an example, Paul declared, "I decided to talk at that point because I heard one side and I heard the other (. . .) to know what the situation is about." The idea of sharing one's perspective during the meetings was very recurrent in the analysis. As another instance, Shannon affirmed with respect to the possibilities of creating a swear jar, "I shared my opinion about how the swear jar thing was not really a good idea, because it was not really fair." With the concern of being heard in mind, many students resorted to different strategies. About this, Karen said,

> I feel like, if my eyes are met with the person I am talking to, I come across more assertively. I say [my comment] clearly. I say it fast. I try not to say it angrily. I try to say it calmly because a lot of persons won't respect me if I start to freak out.

Students were also engaged when it came to voting on different possibilities raised by the assembly. About this, Shannon stated, "I just think whether it would be a good idea to do the thing or if it would be a bad idea." Even though some students were multitasking on some occasions during meetings by either talking with others or by painting, everyone voted all the time on each issue.

Students' Reported and Observed Changes during the Democratic Activities

Students reported changing in several ways after having participated in decision-making processes during class meetings. These changes mostly pertained to students' participations in school meetings and in the school, to their feelings and to their conceptions. Every interviewed student modified how they participated in class meetings and in judicial committees. They described increasing the quantity of comments that they made during these activities. For example, Liz asserted:

> When I first came to the school, I never said anything, (. . .) after a bit, I learned more what was talked the most at the meeting and I knew everybody's name and everybody knew mine so I felt more comfortable with the class so that I could share my opinion more comfortably than before.

Liz' example shows that students, when they increased their participation to discussion, also improved their self-confidence. For many, while they started commenting more frequently, they also started raising topics for class meetings more often. For instance, Ben said, "at the beginning of the year I did not really bring up [any topic], the mistreatment was one of the first one I brought up." In addition, students adapted how they formulated their opinion. On this matter, Paul implied that he started bringing proofs to support his arguments. Changes in students' participation also involved voting. For instance, Shannon affirmed in relation to the beginning of the year, "sometimes I felt like voting what my friends were voting for" and declared, with respect to how she was voting at the moment of the interview, "mostly, I vote on what I want to do." Several students also declared modifying how they fulfilled the roles of chair or peacekeeper. After saying that she felt confident chairing meetings, Karen mentioned, "I was a chair at one of the first class meeting. I wanted to be a chair because I thought that it was interesting. I did not really know much about being a chair so I had a lot of people there to help me about being the chair." Students also changed what they did at the school after the creation of rules and after the organisation of activities during school meetings. Ella expressed, "I was not one of the persons who was leaving like candy wrappers all over the floor, but I started picking up other people's junk" after the assembly had discussed the cleanliness of the kitchen. Earlier, I hinted at the idea that many became more self-confident after taking part in meetings. On this subject, Karen, when asked if she shared her opinion in her first class meetings, replied, "No, I was too shy then (. . .) I guess, I got more confident." Some students changed how they felt about sharing their opinions. For instance, Patrick mentioned, "I have been doing a lot more going on forums on the internet and making comments on forums because I find commenting a lot more fun now." Students also refined their understanding of democratic assemblies. Many learned about some of the issues tackled in class meetings. For instance, one of these issues was about participating in a walk to raise awareness about

the socioeconomic situation of the children in an African region. Ben after having described in an interview the situation of these children, said, “I guess I learned about [the situation of these children].”

Discussion: Significance For Democratic Education and Traditional Schools

Based on what has arisen from my analysis, my contention is that students can develop many skills and attitudes inherent to citizenship engagement in a learning setting that operates democratically. One of these attitudes is a sense of empowerment. Many students indicated feeling confident that they could have an input in what affected their lives and their school. In this sense, Karen declared the following in relation to school meetings, “I think it is great that we get to say what we want to do and that we get to suggest fieldtrips and stuff. I think that it is actually a really, really, good idea.” With this sense of empowerment, the freedom to speak their minds and a space to share their concerns, students can explore new ways of thinking critically. As indicated above, not only did participants articulate their opinions in front of their peers, the majority of them admitted that, when they first attended school meetings, they did not dare to raise their hands to formulate comments while, at the time of my interviews, they did so on a frequent basis. While acquiring the confidence to speak their minds with others, several were also trying to find new ways to better get their point across like the student who suggested that she tried to look at people in their eyes when talking as well as not to “freak out” in the process. Another skill that can evolve for students when taking part in democratic assemblies is the thought process that goes into voting. Indeed, many participants claimed that how they used to vote for what their friends would vote while this had changed to voting in function of what they wanted. For example, Liz commented, “now, even if I would be the only person voting for [a thing that I want], I would still vote for it.”

Earlier, I referred to Galston (2004) who had listed voting and volunteering as democratic engagement markers. Based on this, students during school meetings can be engaged democratically as, at Canadian Free School, students took every opportunity to make their opinion matter when given the possibility to vote. Furthermore, many used the school meetings as a space to organize volunteering activities. For instance, on one occasion, the whole school agreed to participate in a walk to raise awareness about the aforementioned socioeconomic situation of children in a region of Africa. In another instance, a group comprised of a third of the school decided to organize a bake sale to raise funds to help the relief effort in Haiti after an earthquake devastated the country. They were happy to have raised 300$ for the cause. As such, while Biesta (2007) complained that schools were only preparing students for a future participation in a democratic society as opposed to providing students with opportunities to get involved democratically, students at Canadian Free School were engaged democratically both at the level of the school and at that of society.

What does this mean for conventional schools? My position is that students in such schools could enact and develop the same skills and attitudes associated to citizenship engagement as the students who participated in my research if they had more opportunities to be engaged in democratic decision-making processes such as school meetings. Despite the many restrictions imposed on students in such schools, opportunities exist for such decision-making processes. Indeed, many decisions that affect students in traditional schools are often made by teachers or by administrators, even though a good number of these decisions could be taken democratically with students. For instance, students could choose and debate as a group what book to read in an English class. They could pick what sports to play during physical education in the same manner or they could discuss what percentage an exam could have on their final grade. According to Gribble (2004), such democratic processes can work in the most authoritarian school as long as teachers clearly delimit

what students can decide. In such a process, educators can contribute to enlarging the democratic space as such enlargement can not only happen in authoritarian countries, but also within our schools at home.

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