FROM PEDAGOGY TO PARTICIPATION

PROGRESSIVE YOUTHS’ PATHS TO FORMAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

by

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Abstract

Over the past decade, declining electoral engagement among young people has led to a proliferation of research preoccupied with how best to educate for ‘active citizenship.’ It is therefore within a context of heightened theoretical attention that this thesis embarks on a unique, retrospective exploration of the relationship between pedagogy and political participation for a diverse group of progressive young adult Canadians. Whereas young people are commonly deemed apathetic, this research conceives of this cohort as mountingly alienated from liberal, capitalist democracy. At the same time, however, this thesis conceives of young progressives’ electoral participation as strategically necessary, insofar as the collective disengagement of these young adults has a well-documented tendency to benefit those political parties/candidates most radically averse to justice-oriented social change. Ultimately, this research concludes that the capacity of pedagogical interventions to engender participatory tendencies among progressive young people is therefore essential, albeit limited in important ways.
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1. Introduction:

1.1 Pedagogy as ‘Practice’

In recent years, Canadian young adults’ perceived disengagement from politics has routinely been framed as a threat to the legitimacy of liberal democracy (Carter, 2014; Hepburn, 2014; Sevi, 2012; etc.). As well, the anemic electoral participation of 18-34 year olds has precipitated a flurry of academic research concerned with how best to educate for engagement in the democratic process, and advocating that educators employ pedagogical methods shown to nurture voting, political party membership, political candidacy, and more. Mark Evans (2008) writes that such pedagogies are being developed with increasing attention to fitness of purpose, focusing not just what is being taught, but how it is being taught. More and more, researchers argue that so-called ‘democratic classroom practices’ such as dialogue on controversial topics (Vetter, 2008; Hess & Avery, 2008), student involvement in rulemaking (MacMath, 2008), and service learning (Billig, Root & Jesse, 2005) bolster political participation by allowing students to ‘practice’ citizenship. As well, governments in many of Canada’s provinces and territories have revised elementary and/or secondary school curricula, placing new emphasis on active citizenship and political participation. The presumed crisis of Canadian young adults’ political disengagement has, in other words, reached a proverbial boiling point—in the classroom and beyond. This is evidenced not just by the aforementioned barrage of state-initiated pedagogical interventions in formal schooling contexts, but also by the emergence of a cohort of charitable and not-for-profit organizations focused on augmenting Canadians’ civic engagement, and their formal political engagement, in particular. Not unlike school boards across the country, many of these organizations strive to engage young voters by pedagogical means: running government simulations in schools, facilitating mock elections that allow underage citizens to get a feel for the electoral process, and the like. It is thus unsurprising that – in their Handbook of
Research on Civic Engagement in Youth – Lonnie Sherrod, Judith Torney-Purta, and Constance Flanagan (2010) write that the study of youths’ civic engagement (and the various pedagogical initiatives intended to foster it) has truly “come of age” (p. 1). As a colleague at a conference of the American Educational Research Association recently quipped, however, “If there’s a handbook, it’s almost certainly time to take a critical look at the field!” As it turns out, even a cursory glance at the field of research focused on pedagogical approaches to fomenting political engagement reveals that even in the midst of ever-increasing theoretical attention, there remains a significant paucity of research that meaningfully problematizes the pedagogical goal of promoting youths’ increased conventional engagement in liberal, representative democracy. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Carpenter, 2011; Pachi & Barrett, 2012; Kennelly, 2011; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), scant attention is paid to the troubling capacity of normative, state-sanctioned forms of political engagement to uphold corporate and elite interests (Gilens & Page, 2014). The degree to which electoral participation can facilitate alienation and apathy in between election cycles is often ignored. Civic engagement initiatives that are even nominally critical of liberal democracy itself, meanwhile, remain still more elusive. Overall, Canadians – and young Canadians in particular – are generally encouraged to participate formally in politics regardless of the likely outcomes of their participation, regardless of the important socioeconomic differences between them, and regardless of their ideological persuasions. Most efforts to bolster their engagement are explicitly non-partisan, and treat engagement itself as their end goal rather than recognizing formal political participation as a (flawed) means by which to achieve progressive, social-justice oriented change.
1.2 Problematizing the Pedagogic Task

An increase in pedagogic efforts to combat young voters’ perceived disengagement from politics is by no means without justification. Statistics confirm that young Canadians are uniquely and increasingly disengaged from formal politics. Following the country’s 2011 federal election, voter turnout among 18-24 year olds was declared “considerably below the average” (Mayrand, 2012) with just 38.8 percent of younger voters casting ballots (Block, Larrivée, & Warner, 2011). Moreover, voter turnout is but one measure of young people’s growing dissatisfaction with and disengagement from electoral democracy. All across North American and Europe, political party membership and campaign volunteerism are also declining markedly with the coming of age of each new generation of citizens (DeBardeleben & Pammett, 2009; Putnam, 2000). In the American context, Kahne et al (2013) argue that this shift is at least partly attributable to young adults’ burgeoning lack of interest in what are known as ‘big P politics’—that is, “the influence of elites and state institutions” (p. 420).

Here in Canada, meanwhile, this same argument is supported by domestic data which reveal that while today’s young adults participate actively (in some cases, more actively than previous generations) in so-called ‘little p’ political fora (e.g. writing letters to the editor, donating to political causes, doing volunteer work, and protesting), they are measurably less likely to correspond with elected officials, volunteer in elections, attend political meetings, and/or maintain active membership in a political party (Anderson, Hilderman, & Loat, 2013). The shifting nature of young adults’ political participation and civic engagement will be examined in further detail in Chapter Two, but serves here to briefly introduce readers to an emerging canon of political science research: that youths’ engagement with the institutional mechanisms of liberal democracy (herein referred to as formal engagement) is decreasing, apparently in favour of other forms of political participation. Thus, the notion that youth are
simply apathetic is, by and large, refuted by an ever-growing body of evidence which suggests that young people are in fact actively seeking out alternative forms of engagement, having presumably deemed liberal representative democracy alienating and ineffective. In particular, we are routinely reminded that young adults’ political participation increasingly occurs in online settings—namely, on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit and may thus be unfamiliar as opposed to unreal (Metzger et al, 2015; Kyranakis & Nurvala, 2013; etc.).

Levels of formal political participation are, of course, a central preoccupation of political science. In their test of the so-called ‘rational choice’ model for predicting voter turnout, Blais et al (2000) find that whereas the perceived benefits associated with voting are found to influence the probability of some Canadian electors casting a ballot, a majority of voters are far more likely to be motivated by a moralistic sense of duty than by any sort of risk/benefit calculus. Loewen and Dawes (2012), meanwhile, go so far as to argue that this same sense of duty “appears to be heritable” (p. 368) at the level of genetics, and even apart from the influence of parental socialization explored so thoroughly elsewhere (Dalton, 1982; Beck & Jennings, 1982; Neundorf et al, 2013; etc.). Although these prominent theories provide an array of worthwhile models for predicting and explaining voter turnout in general, however, they do little to account for a new and ever-increasing reduction in voter turnout among young adults in particular. Indeed, while youth have long had a tendency to vote and otherwise participate in formal politics at lower rates than older adults, the magnitude of today’s generational divide is newly pronounced and – according to a growing body of research – unlikely to be reversed through “non-voters choosing to become voters later in life” (Siaroff, 2009, p. 45). Regrettably, the degree to which research on young people’s’s shifting political engagement differentiates between youth according to their social relations
is distinctly limited. As well, young adults’ motivations for engaging in particular ways and not others are substantially less well-examined by the literature than the fact of their cumulatively evolving engagement. By exploring participants’ varied accounts of the role of race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and other forms of difference in their politicization, this study strives to avoid such abstraction. Its efforts to account for the social relations affecting young people are admittedly – and importantly – limited, however. This is due to the relative privilege of a vast majority of my research participants and my own failure to adequately account for participants’ social locations in my research design.

Alongside theories of what makes an individual inherently more or less likely to participate formally in politics, possible explanations for young adults’ mounting disengagement from formal politics abound—among them: young people’s increased residential mobility (Bachner, 2011); the notion of a democratic deficit stemming from incongruence between “the performance of democracy… and public aspirations” (Norris, 2011, p. 5); and altogether valid criticisms of Canada’s first-past-the-post electoral system (e.g. Milner, 2004). Far more disruptive to conventional efforts to engage young citizens, however, are Marxist scholars’ assertions that liberal democracy is dialectically linked to the structural violence and systemic exploitation of capitalism. (In fact, these same assertions have been hugely disruptive force in my own research journey, and a preliminary exploration of their post facto influence on my work makes up Chapter Five of this thesis.) In her introductory text on Marx, for instance, critical adult educator Paula Allman (2007) writes that liberal democracy is “the form of government most conducive to capitalism… [wherein] citizens alienate their political power and capacities by handing them over to elected representatives, over whom they have little or no day-to-day influence or control” (p. 35). Allman’s argument is that liberal democracy and capitalism are not merely related, but
actively constitute each other. Marxist theorist Ellen Meiksins Wood, meanwhile, conceives of the relationship between liberal democracy and capitalism by recounting their inextricably entwined origins in history. In particular, Wood highlights the fact that modern democracy works to obscure persistent – indeed worsening – material inequalities by emphasizing citizens’ legal equality. This position is neatly summarized by the following passage from Wood’s book, *Democracy against Capitalism*:

“In capitalist democracy, the separation between civic status and class position operates in both directions: socio-economic position does not determine the right to citizenship – and that is what is democratic in capitalist democracy – but, since the power of the capitalist to appropriate the surplus labour of workers is not dependent on a privileged juridical or civic status, civic equality does not directly affect or significantly modify class inequality – and that is what limits democracy in capitalism” (1995, p. 213).

Understanding liberal democracy’s dialectical relationship to capitalism – expressed so cogently by Allman and historicized so helpfully by Wood – makes apparent the degree to which this system of government is constructed to reproduce capitalist social relations. Thus, liberal democracy is not merely co-opted by elite interests, but is inherently premised upon their primacy. A recent review of nearly 2,000 policy cases by Gilens and Page (2014) effectively confirms as much, concluding that “[w]hen a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites and/or with organized interests, [the citizens] generally lose” (p. 23). Although unsurprising, this contemporary empirical finding affirms what Marx himself long ago observed in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*: that the “executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (Marx, 1977/1848, p. 35). Moreover, critical anti-racist and feminist scholars (Thobani, 2007) remind us that the deprived history of capitalism is also the history of genocide, colonialism, dispossession and slavery—each one internally related to the other, and each one inextricably bound up in liberal democracy’s unique ability to abstract the material self from the legal
self. “[R]ace politics are class politics,” says Sunera Thobani (Carroll, 2012, p. 15). So too do liberal democratic politics and capitalist politics constitute each other.

Even this very brief Marxian analysis helps us to see the world as it really is: “an infinite number of mutually dependent processes that coalesce to form a structured whole or totality” (Ollman, 2008, p. 10). Needless to say, such a lens is deeply disruptive to unreflexive efforts to foment young adults’ conventional political participation in liberal democratic contexts. I can personally attest to the degree to which reading the work of Marx and neo-Marxist theorists makes apparent the problematic nature of non-partisan efforts to bolster young adults’ formal political engagement, simply for its own sake. In particular, the notion that young adults’ conventional political participation might be straightforwardly endorsed by any remotely justice- oriented educator is belied by this brief overview of the dialectical relationship between modern liberal democracy and capitalism. Notwithstanding the increasing centrality of these critiques to my research, however, I believe it remains vital to acknowledge that young adults’ persistent disengagement from formal politics makes it all too easy for government to be ‘apathetic’ towards youth, and progressive youth above all. The nature of this relationship is encapsulated succinctly by Jane Eisner (2004) in her citation of a Republican Party strategist in the U.S. who proclaimed to 2003 Philadelphia mayoral candidate Sam Katz that he need not “spend a lot of time talking about things that matter to people who don’t vote” (p. 46). While the popular mantra, “If you don’t vote, you can’t complain” remains a fundamentally undemocratic trope, it is certainly true that – to the degree that they are dictated by the polis at all – policy priorities are dictated by its voting members. Even assuming that the growing tendency of young adults to forgo formal political engagement is premised upon resistance to the alienating power of liberal democracy, it is clear that this shift has contributed to the emergence of conservatism as a more dominant
ideology than if younger voters were more equitably represented in formal politics (Grenier, 2010; Levine et al, 2008; Madland & Logan, 2008). Canada in the new millennium provides an especially fitting example of this phenomenon. Here, young people’s increased transference of political participation from conventional to unconventional fora has coincided with the so-called ‘Harper Decade’—roughly ten years with Conservative party leader Stephen Harper as the country’s Prime Minister. Polling data reveals this intersection to be more than merely coincidental, suggesting that if 18-34 year olds were more inclined to participate formally in politics, Harper’s Conservatives would almost certainly have failed to obtain majority government status in 2011 (Grenier, 2010; Bryden, 2014). Thus, a number of the racist, colonial, and environmentally destructive policies that have since been implemented under the Harper regime might never have seen the light of day.

Bearing in mind these formidable tensions and contradictions, this thesis conceives of young progressives’ burgeoning disengagement from formal/electoral politics as at once (1) a potentially transformative shift away from a liberal democratic politics of manufactured consent, and (2) a major boon for those committed to the unfettered proliferation of neoliberal reforms and conservative governance. Otherwise put, this thesis argues that Canadian young adults’ disengagement from formal politics – however warranted, principled, and even revolutionary – serves chiefly to benefit those political parties most averse to progressive social change, and relegates to the proverbial backburner those policy concerns most relevant to this emerging cohort of citizens.

1.3 Introducing the Research Questions

Participants in this study were ten 18-34 year old Canadians, identifying as left-wing, and formally engaged in electoral politics. More detail on participants’ individual
characteristics and social relations will be provided in Chapter Four, however it is essential to acknowledge early on that a majority of the young men and women recruited for this study came from relatively privileged backgrounds. Although some grew up in low-income, racialized families, they nevertheless tended to attend well-resourced, high-performing schools. Many were enrolled in French Immersion programs, which are more likely to serve affluent youth with university-educated parents (Parekh, Killoran, & Crawford, 2011). Almost without exception, interviewees had, themselves, attended university following high school\(^1\). As one participant – who will be identified by the pseudonym Jenn – acknowledged: “I have a shitload of privilege. I’m white. I was raised middle class… Both of my parents fared extremely well as a result of the additional schooling that they took.” Although some of Jenn’s fellow participants had immigrant parents who had not completed any post-secondary education, she was far from alone in accessing particular kinds of pedagogical experiences largely due to her privileged social location.

The nature of participants’ formal political participation, meanwhile, was somewhat more varied. One participant was an elected member of federal parliament. Many were political party volunteers (with either the Green Party or the NDP). A number of participants were also involved in non-partisan, not-for-profit efforts to engage Canadians in formal politics. Notably, most participants were also engaged in unconventional forms of political expression and social justice organizing—including labour organizing, LGBT activism, gender justice campaigning, and more. The primary focus of this study was on their formal political participation, however. Using data from my interviews with these young adults regarding their past pedagogical experiences and current political participation, I strive to address the following research questions, which guide this inquiry:

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1 One participant (Samantha) dropped out of high school. She later completed the GED exam to obtain her high school diploma, but did not complete a post-secondary degree.
1. How do progressive young adult Canadians – formally engaged in politics – believe pedagogy can help foster such engagement?

2. How have participants’ own pedagogical experiences in formal schooling contexts influenced the nature of their political engagement?

Additionally, Chapter Five of this thesis provides an initial exploration of a third research question, which could conceivably provide ample theoretical fodder for an entire supplemental thesis investigation of its own:

3. To what extent do participants articulate a dialectical understanding of liberal democracy and the limitations of state-sanctioned forms of political participation therein?
   
   a. Where applicable, what do they attribute this criticality to?

I include this question separately because I articulated it too late to authentically incorporate it as a central component of my research design. This thesis is, therefore, chiefly an investigation of pedagogical approaches to fostering progressive youths’ critical engagement in formal politics. This is primarily because I was only fully exposed to diverse Marxist analyses of liberal democracy once my study was underway. With each passing day, these theories have come to influence my understanding of my research project and findings in new and essential ways. To pretend that they were a central influence from my study’s inception, however, would be disingenuous—no doubt evidently so. Readers will therefore discover that my findings are primarily preoccupied with offering a retrospective look at pedagogies that the formally political young progressives with whom I spoke deemed central to their engagement. Happily, this alone proves to be a useful contribution to the field. As I will discuss further in Chapter Four, much of the existing research on pedagogy and political participation is predictive, dealing with children’s intentions of participating politically in various ways as adults. This study’s principal theoretical and empirical contributions are therefore derived from its unique temporal lens and its exclusive focus on young women and men explicitly and committedly preoccupied with justice-oriented social change.
1.4 Overview of the Study

I chose to interview 18-34 year olds because this age range encapsulates Elections Canada’s two youngest cohorts of voters as delineated in the bulk of its literature, as well as the category of ‘young adults’ as conceptualized by much of the literature on the political socialization of different demographics (e.g. Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012; Fisher, 2008; Reicher, 2006) and by a growing field of research on ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2007; 2014; etc.). My reasons for interviewing only those young adults who explicitly identify as ‘progressive’ meanwhile, are more complex and stem chiefly from a reflexive acknowledgement of my own political convictions. As indicated above – and affirmed throughout this document – I am not interested in the promotion of young adults’ formal political participation for its own sake. Indeed, I am quite wary of pedagogic agendas that strive merely to boost electoral engagement, without considering whether such engagement might, in fact, preclude meaningful social change. To interview an ideologically broad cross-section of young adult Canadians, including those committed to the preservation of the status quo or the heedless proliferation of free-market capitalism would therefore be theoretically incoherent.

Alongside these considerations of participant selection, some of the other theoretical assumptions and convictions undergirding my research should be made explicit here. First, this study assumes that participatory/active pedagogies (a detailed examination of which can be found in Chapter Two) are more likely to foster political engagement – formal and otherwise – than passive/depository frameworks for teaching and learning. Second, it assumes that the increased participation of progressive, young adult Canadians in formal politics will make governments more progressive and accountable, and will pave the way for more seismic change to come. Third, it accepts that whereas some young adults may be
thoughtlessly and generally disengaged, a great many have made principled decisions to disengage from formal politics, in particular. And finally, it assumes that those justice-oriented young adult Canadians who are engaged in formal politics will have valuable insights to offer about which pedagogies contributed to their engagement, and what critical engagement in a liberal democratic context might look like.

The study begins with a review of the literature pertaining to the shifting nature of young people’s political engagement, the tangible consequences of their collective withdrawal from formal politics, and the role of pedagogy in fomenting particular kinds of political participation. The latter portion of this literature review focuses chiefly on three categories of research: (1) the apparent influence of an open/‘democratic’ classroom climate, (2) the effects of experiential learning initiatives such as simulation-based learning, and (3) and the reported impact of student-centred approaches to assessment/evaluation. This literature review also provides a sense of my theoretical framework as it was—premised largely on this existing body of research, which tends to treat formal political engagement as a uniquely legitimate and therefore desirable form of civic participation. As discussed, this framework effectively legitimizes liberal democracy and the state, negating – by its omission – the possibility that young adults’ disengagement from formal, liberal democratic politics reflects the promise of a more democratic future to come, rather than the threat of anti-democratic apathy. This is an admitted limitation of my study as it was originally conceived, but not – I believe – one which refutes the importance of the findings delineated herein.

In Chapter Three, I go onto lay out my methodological framework, describing the epistemological convictions that informed my decisions about recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. In Chapter Four, I share my research findings, organized into four primary

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2 Scholars such as Janet Newman (2010) remind us that such categories do not emerge in a vacuum, but are informed by the pedagogical interventions of states, as they endeavor to craft particular kinds of citizens and foster particular kinds of “citizen empowerment.”
sections, each dealing with a different category of pedagogical experiences – ranging from the extraordinary to the mundane – which participants identified as central to their becoming active in formal politics. In Chapter Five, I transition to an examination of participants’ analyses of the relative function and value of formal political engagement in the pursuit of progressive social change and take up some of the theories associated with a Marxist critique of liberal democracy in greater detail. Here, I also consider how a more credible application of a Marxist theoretical framework to the study of progressive young adults’ formal political participation might have influenced the research and an interpretation of its findings. Finally, Chapter Six concludes with a discussion of the implications of my research for justice-oriented educators preoccupied with (progressive) young adults’ diminishing engagement with formal politics, and elaborates on possible areas for future research.
2. Literature Review

2.1 The Changing Nature of Participation

Despite the familiarity of statistics pertaining to young Canadians’ disengagement from formal politics, public anxiety about youths’ so-called ‘apathy’ seems only to grow. News media perennially bemoan the 18-34 year old cohort’s anemic electoral participation (Carter, 2014; Hepburn, 2014; Raj, 2014; Sevi, 2012) and an ever-increasing number of not-for-profit organizations such as Samara Canada, Apathy is Boring, Civix Canada, and Civic Mirror works to instill participatory tendencies in the country’s young people. The bulk of these initiatives – as well as their school-based equivalents – tend to depict youth as straightforwardly apathetic, and their formal civic engagement as unequivocally desirable.

By and large, the fact that today’s youth are – according to many metrics – more politically active than previous generations (Anderson et al, 2013; Kyranakis & Nurvala, 2013; Lima and Artiles, 2013; Sloam, 2013; Adams & Flumian, 2015) is ignored by contemporary efforts to engage young adults. In addition to advocating a critique of those efforts to promote formal political participation that treat engagement itself as the end goal, I advocate that educators and researchers alike discard the proposition that youth are apathetic and (implicitly) passive. Rather, I propose that many youth are in fact conscientiously discarding conventional forms of political participation in favour of strategies less conducive to the reproduction of the status quo. This proposition is supported by data from a recent survey of over two thousand Canadians which revealed that across a number of metrics apart from voting, 18-34 year old respondents actually participated more politically than older research participants. In fact, they surpassed the 35+ crowd in terms of their engagement in political discussions; protest activity; other activist work; and more—every category, that is, except formal political engagement. Here, older respondents were markedly more likely to contact elected officials; attend political meetings; volunteer in election campaigns; donate money to
political parties; and maintain political party membership (Anderson et al, 2013). In terms of voting, meanwhile, Elections Canada data reveals that 35+ Canadians outpaced 18-34 year olds by a margin of more than 23% in the most recent federal election and that the voter turnout gap between younger and older voters is ever widening (Block, Larrivée, & Warner, 2011).

These figures are not the only ones to suggest that youth are not disinclined to participate in politics, overall, so much as electoral/formal politics, specifically. In their survey of recent research on the nature of young people’s political participation in Europe, for instance, Kyranakis and Nurvala (2013) found that youths’ “perceived ‘apathy’ seems to be… limited to electoral politics” (p. 264). Similarly, in their analysis of data from the 2012 European Social Survey (ESS), Lima and Artiles (2013) refer to the proliferation of youth-led protest in post-austerity Europe as a generational “expression of meta-political motivation” (p. 347) due to young people’s broad dissatisfaction with liberal democracy. What’s more, the ESS data revealed that in southern European countries especially, survey respondents who chose to forgo voting were 45% more likely to be involved in some kind of non-electoral political action—again suggesting disenchantment with liberal democracy and its affiliated mechanisms, rather than overall apathy. As well, another analysis of this same ESS data determined that whereas voter turnout has been on a steady decline internationally since the 1960s, “the joining of boycotts has more than doubled, participation in demonstrations has grown by over 40 per cent, and the signing of petitions has increased by more than a quarter” (Sloam, 2013, p. 5). As Blanch (2005) writes:
“[Y]outh are not disinterested in politics in a broad sense, and periodically become actively involved in movements, volunteering and social activity. Even though social-capital indicators such as levels of association, interpersonal trust and political confidence have not increased… unconventional participation levels suggest that youth are not politically alienated.” (p. 66)

According to Alistair Ross and Melinda Dooly (2010), while “voting participation has gradually declined over the past thirty years… informal political activism has risen sharply over the same period” (p. 46). More recently, research conducted by the Toronto-based Environics Institute also found that although Canadians may not be voting or joining political parties as much as they once did, there has been no corresponding decline in their likelihood of signing petitions, discussing political issues, and more. Moreover, this research reveals that such informal displays of political engagement are now disproportionately common among young and left-leaning Canadians. Overall, the study’s findings led to the following conclusion in an accompanying newspaper article co-authored by one of the researchers:

“Just as disengagement from traditional religious practice did not mean that Canadians were abandoning the quest for spiritual meaning, the decline of voting does not mean Canadians are entirely politically indifferent” (Adams & Flumian, 2015).

Jessica Taft and Hava Gordon (2013) provide a theoretical lens to help us understand these shifts in their ethnographic work on youth advisory councils throughout North America. Once heralded as “celebrated sites of political agency for youth who do not yet have access to the vote” (p. 88), they argue that these councils have effectively become crucibles for normative and elitist forms of political participation. Thus, youths’ declining participation in such enterprises is less an indication of their lack of interest in politics, and more emblematic of their conscientious departures from these spaces—having found them inadequately representative and lamentably tokenistic. Likewise, Saunders (2009) argues that conceptions of youth as disengaged from politics are inaccurate and unfair, and that “solving
the ‘civic crisis’ may be a matter of adapting the system to a new informational environment rather than bringing youth back into the fold of a structure that in some senses is no longer relevant” (p. 273).

Overall, the notion that youth are simply disengaged or cannot be bothered to play a role in activating social change is, by and large, refuted by an ever-growing body of evidence to the contrary. This same evidence does, however, confirm that today’s young people are turning away from formal/electoral political participation in ever growing numbers, and with ever diminishing intentions of exploring such forms of engagement in the future. In fact, Kennelly (2011) posits that a degree of animosity has emerged between the so-called ‘good citizen’ youth and the activist youth—the former relying predominantly on her formal civic engagement to effect change; the latter taking up less conventional methods (i.e. ‘little p’ politics). This study seeks, in part, to disrupt this emerging dichotomy and its implicit suggestion that an embrace of formal political engagement necessarily signifies compliance with neoliberal norms on the part of young citizens. By interviewing progressive youth – a vast majority of whom explicitly reject neo-liberal values of privatization, deregulation, and ‘personal responsibility’ – the research troubles the notion that form dictates function, positing that formal political engagement can be a tool for meaningful progressive social change, if wielded in a critically-conscious manner.

2.2 The Case for Formal Participation

As we know, the informal political action of Canadian youth has at times proven to be hugely effectual. Quebec’s recent ‘Maple Spring’ protests against a province-wide tuition increase in 2012 are one brilliant example. Praised by Henry Giroux (2013) as “a historical awakening” (p. 528) these demonstrations were an instance where the massive mobilization
of young Canadians “using their voices and bodies to redefine the boundaries of the possible” (p. 516) put an ordinarily marginalized issue on the front pages of national newspapers for months. Ultimately, however, a majority of students involved in these protests appear to have paired their non-electoral engagement with an appearance at the ballot box. Provincial election data reveals that voter turnout among 18-24 year olds increased by a remarkable 25% between Quebec’s 2008 and 2012 elections (Gélineau & Teyssier, 2012) and a campaign promise to halt any tuition hikes is believed to have contributed substantially (if not accounted for) the electoral victory of Pauline Marois’s Parti Québécois in 2012.

The question of whether ‘Maple Spring’ participants would have managed to achieve a tuition freeze without pairing their protest activity with electoral/formal engagement is of course unanswerable. However recent analyses of national political polling data in Canada suggest that the increased participation of young adult Canadians in formal politics could substantially alter the country’s political landscape. In particular, a review of 2010 data from the EKOS polling firm reveals that if 18-24 year olds alone had voted in 2011, Canada would almost certainly have elected a Liberal minority government, and popular support for the Conservative party would have been dramatically reduced (Grenier, 2010). Likewise, data collected by high-profile Canadian pollster Nik Nanos during the 2011 election campaign indicates that if 18-24 year olds had managed even the same turnout as the general population, the Conservatives would have been unlikely to win a majority, and the tone of the overall debate would have shifted considerably—towards a much broader swath of issues including environmentalism and education (Bryden, 2014). Such findings are significant in the face of widespread sentiment about the futility of voting. They reveal that, in fact, if a more demographically representative sample of Canadians (in terms of age, and otherwise) were to vote; engage with political parties; and correspond with elected officials, the
country’s ideological landscape would be unfamiliar terrain.

In particular, the possibility that Stephen Harper’s Conservatives might not have managed to form a majority government in 2011 warrants further consideration. After all, many policies implemented by the Conservatives since then have encountered substantial resistance in the House of Commons, but have thus far been largely unstoppable due to the party’s ability to whip a majority of votes. Among them: legislation requiring immigrants to have resided in Canada for four years before qualifying for citizenship (Bill C-24); an omnibus crime bill (Bill C-10) which imposed mandatory minimum sentences for drug-related offences, effectively negating judicial discretion and disproportionately incarcerating racialized Canadians; a now infamous budget implementation bill (Bill C-38) which repealed the Fair Wages and Hours of Labour Act, the Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act, and more; and a so-called ‘anti-terrorism act’ (Bill C-51) which critics have warned dramatically curtails civil liberties and criminalizes peaceful protest. The suggestion of the polling data mentioned above, meanwhile, is that if more youth had merely voted, the government’s ability to enact policies such as these would be substantially encumbered, if not altogether negated.

Regrettably, scholarly research examining the relationship between age and political ideology – and theorizing the potential effects of increased formal political participation on the part of young adults – is limited. Most academic studies of how demographic changes influence policy tend to concentrate on trends in migration, rather than on age. According to Kaufmann et al (2012), however, “[t]here is a clear tendency for shifts in political allegiance and attitudes to be largest among young adults and then sharply decline at older ages” (p. 57). Although it does not speak to the overall or shared ideological persuasions of younger voters, this assertion provides a potential explanation for the degree to which young people’s
formal participation appears likely to *broaden* political debate. According to this analysis, young voters’ values and policy preoccupations are generally more fluid and less entrenched than those of their parents and grandparents. To the degree that there *is* consistency across different cohorts of young voters, however, it seems they are indeed more left-leaning than their elders. Research produced by a number of non-governmental organizations confirms this. A report published by the New America Foundation following the 2008 general election in the U.S., for instance, argues that “[t]oday’s young people… have a more progressive identity than did previous generations at their age and are likely to move the country leftward on economic and social issues for decades to come” (Levine et al, 2008, p. 3). Interestingly, its authors also assert that this is a *new* phenomenon—rather than the continuation of what one might assume to be a long-standing trend towards politics becoming more progressive with the coming of age of each subsequent generation of voters. In fact, their data indicate that in a vast majority of U.S. presidential elections before 2004, young voters tended to support the same candidates as older members of the electorate, meaning that the ‘ideological gap’ between generations is an emerging/growing one. Another study by researchers at the Center for American Progress culled from the National Election Survey and the General Social Survey in the U.S. to determine the political views of so-called ‘millennials’ (i.e. young adults born between 1979 and 1990). Again, this research found that on a number of issues ranging from health care to education, young voters were more progressive: supporting greater government spending, even in the event that it was accompanied by higher taxation (Madland & Logan, 2008). What is more, young respondents again proved to be more left-leaning on these issues even relative to older generations of voters *when they were the same age*. This further supports the suggestion that the progressive persuasions of today’s young voters are newly so, and a generational phenomenon rather than a temporary reflection
of life stage. In Canada, meanwhile, recent research by David McGrane (2015) asserts that “young Canadians aged 35 and under across all walks of life are more likely to be to the left of older Canadians aged 36 or over” (p. 3). Overall, the available evidence on young people’s policy preferences therefore points to the potential for their increased participation in formal politics to substantially influence public debate and dialogue. These varied research findings serve to reinforce a social justice-oriented argument for the proliferation of pedagogies that appear suited to fostering young adults’ formal political participation, provided these do not obscure the flawed nature of the electoral system Canadian youth are currently obliged to participate within, nor the importance of engaging in other ways as well.

2.3 From Pedagogy to Participation

In addition to its importance as a political consideration, the question of youths’ supposed apathy – and their actual lack thereof – is a crucial pedagogical consideration. After all, in the pursuit of pedagogical approaches to fostering critical engagement with formal politics it is all too easy to ignore the agency of youth, and to treat their disengagement as a somehow inherent rather than elective. One of the most seminal critiques of treating as passive those students that educators presumably hope will become active citizens comes from renowned pragmatist, John Dewey. In his 1916 book *Democracy and Education*, Dewey went so far as to write that “some evils in education… flow from the isolation of method from subject matter” (p. 197). This divorcing of content from its method of delivery struck Dewey as a phenomenon that only occurs when we pause to reflect upon an experience, rather than merely having it—effectively abstracting consciousness from practice. Using Dewey’s logic, education for citizenship, free from scrutiny, should therefore be student-centred, interactive, and inquiry-based. Dewey argued passionately, as well, that
teachers be permitted to retain the flexibility and autonomy necessary to teach in a context-specific way, writing that “nothing has brought pedagogical theory into greater disrepute than the belief that it is identified with handing out to teachers recipes and models to be followed in teaching” (p. 199). Despite the cogency of his famed denunciations of the isolation (or abstraction) of method from subject matter and purpose, however, Dewey remains guilty of occasionally employing analogies that themselves ignore the profound agency of learners. Here, for instance, he likens them to plants in a greenhouse, as opposed to active participants in their own educations:

“[I]f a man [sic] watches carefully the growth of several plants, some of which do well and some of which amount to little or nothing, he may be able to detect the special conditions upon which the prosperous development of a plant depends. These conditions, stated in an orderly sequence, would constitute the method or way or manner of its growth… When we have arranged these causes in order, we have a method of procedure or a technique” (1916, p. 197).

The work of critical adult educator Paulo Freire – which is drawn upon, explicitly or otherwise, by many scholars theorizing pedagogical efforts to promote political participation – rejects wholeheartedly such conceptions of learners. Preferring to refer to them as “simultaneously teachers and students” (1970, p. 72) Freire re-envisions the teacher-student relationship as an alliance of equals, united in the pursuit of social justice. Just as liberal democracy is too easily abstracted from its internal relation to capitalism, however, Freire’s revolutionary work is often abstracted from its profoundly radical roots. Although electoral engagement was, at most, a peripheral concern for Freire, he at times goes so far as to explicitly critique voting. In Pedagogy of Freedom he derides those citizens who subscribe to the notion that “[a]ll you have to do is vote for this candidate and he will do the thinking for you” (1998, p. 117). Certainly much of his work is scornful of neoliberal clientelism masquerading as democracy (De Azevedo & Schugurensky, 2005), and yet Freirian
principles are regularly applied by educators seeking to increase voter turnout. Some studies examining the capacity of an open classroom climate to engender pro-voting behaviour, for instance, draw from Freire (e.g. Diemer & Li, 2011). Still more borrow from his groundbreaking critique of ‘banking education’ without citing his influence directly. Admittedly, few of these researchers are solely interested in voting, but their applications of Freirian principles for the purposes of fostering greater engagement with the formal mechanisms of liberal democracy nevertheless call to mind Stanley Aronowitz’s observation that –the term [Freire] employs to summarize his approach to education, ‘pedagogy’ is often interpreted as a “teaching method rather than a philosophy or a social theory” (1993, p. 8). In this instance, Aronowitz was objecting to the use of Freire’s radically political approach to education as a mere tool for motivating students. The caution, however, is arguably as applicable to the increasingly widespread use of Freire to foster formal political engagement. Returning to Allman, once again, readers will find an indictment of applications of Freire that ignore his works’ theoretical underpinnings:

“I know from my own experiences that if you abstract Freire’s ideas from their Marxist theoretical context, you will miss the precision of his analysis and ignore the revolutionary or transformative intent of his work” (Allman as cited by Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010, p. 117).

Crucially, however, this is not to suggest that Freire opposed voting. In The Politics of Education he writes:

“The injustice that illiteracy in itself implies involves more serious implications, such as the castration of illiterates in their inability to make decisions for themselves, to vote, and to participate in the political process. This seemed absurd to me.” (1985, p. 176).

By all accounts, Freire was thus motivated to do literacy work with Brazilian peasants in part because of a requirement at the time that citizens be literate in order to vote. As evidenced by the above, this struck Friere as hugely unjust, implying that he believed voting to be a worthwhile pursuit despite its profound limitations. Likewise, rather than allow his disdain
for capitalism to preclude him from participating in the political system that upholds it, he
ostensibly sought to achieve revolution incrementally and from within. This is evidenced, in
part, by the fact that Freire was instrumental in the creation of Brazil’s Worker’s Party
(Partido dos Trabalhadores) in the 1980s and, as Dale & Hyslop-Margison (2010) write,
“developed close relationships with popular-class Brazilian politicians [which] allowed him
to create many education programs that were aligned with his own vision of equal access to
education” (p. 63). Further, when the Worker’s Party first won an assortment of municipal
elections in 1988, Freire was involved in its efforts to institute a participatory budget process
in Porto Alegre, through which the municipal budget “constituted itself into a new public
space that is connected to the state but controlled by the community” (De Azevedo &
Schugurensky, 2005, p. 44).

It is in this spirit of participating formally, albeit with a crucial degree of criticality,
that I advocate the use of pedagogies that provide fertile ground for the cultivation of a form
of liberal democratic participation that might lead to – or at the very least, does nothing to
preclude – the eventual dismantling of capitalism (and thus liberal democracy itself).
Whereas Kennelly (2011) derides contemporary citizenship education initiatives as “a form
of governance designed not to enhance youth political participation but, in fact, to shore up
state credibility and undermine challenges to its legitimacy” (p. 20), a Freirian conception of
pedagogy intended to foster (in)formal political participation suggests that citizenship
education in fact has the capacity to be deeply disruptive. Drawing on the work of André
Gorz, Brian Martin (2012) provides a helpful framework for considering this value from an
anarchistic perspective, suggesting that the same pedagogical interventions that have been
deemed likely to promote youths’ formal political participation – thus precipitating relatively
immediate, if minor, social change – may also lay the basis for more revolutionary change to
come:

“Some types of reform reinforce authority structures and conventional thinking; others challenge them… [A]dvocates of reform can contribute to radical change in the long term even though they are not revolutionaries. The key is how reform efforts are promoted” (p. 59, 68).

Fortunately, there is much in the literature to support the suggestion that pedagogical reforms which subvert convention in the way described by Martin here can, at the same time, promote formal and informal political engagement alike. An altogether exhaustive review of this literature is well beyond the scope of this review due to the immense proliferation of such research in recent years. The following, however, provides a fairly comprehensive picture of the existing landscape.

By and large, the research seems to be in agreement that some manifestation of ‘active’ learning is best suited to fostering civically-engaged tendencies in students. What, exactly, constitutes this type of learning, however, is much disputed. For whatever reason, types of learning (and the pedagogies they imply) tend to be conceptualized in triads. Jon Miller’s *The Holistic Curriculum* describes transmissive, transactional, and transformative learning, for instance (2007). And adult educator Patricia Cranton (2013) conceives of three primary kinds of learning that have much in common with Miller’s taxonomy: instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory learning. Just as Miller’s ideal pedagogy coherently encapsulates all three of his identified types of learning, Cranton argues that instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory learning are all likely to be integral to the completion of a given task:

“Driving a car involves a fair amount of instrumental learning. A person needs to learn how to manipulate the gears, steering, signal lights, windshield wipers, and headlights … Driving a car also includes communicative learning. Rules of the road are socially constructed—which side of the road to drive on, what speed to drive, when to pass… And finally, driving a car requires emancipatory learning. People need to consider why they drive a car, what the environmental effects of driving a car might be, what the social implications
are of hundreds of individuals each driving (one person per car) down a highway into a city centre to a workplace, and what the long term effects are of using fossil fuels to do these things” (Cranton, 2013, p. 100).

Likewise, an assortment of different types of learning is almost certainly needed to participate formally in politics. Here, instrumental learning (achieved chiefly through what Miller identifies as transmissive teaching) is needed to understand the mechanics of voting, contacting elected officials, running for office, and becoming a political party member. Communicative learning (achieved chiefly through transactional teaching) is central to understanding the social dynamics of civic engagement—that is, knowing how to influence elected officials, who to engage with, and what type of engagement will be most efficacious. Emancipatory learning, meanwhile (achieved chiefly through transformative teaching) is essential to understanding the value of civic engagement—why to engage; whether electoral engagement is worthwhile; and what we hope our critical, electoral engagement will achieve.

In the citizenship education literature, the sum of these parts is commonly referred to as one’s sense of political efficacy (Beaumont, 2010) and all parts are assuredly necessary and variably acquired. Eurocentric western education, however, consistently prioritizes Miller’s transmissive teaching and Cranton’s instrumental learning over their more participatory, democratic, and constructive counter-parts (Homana, G., Barber, C., & Torney-Purta, J., 2006; Evans, 2008; etc.) In his analysis of how secondary school teachers in the U.K. and Canada conceive of and teach for citizenship, for instance, Evans (2006) determined that teachers’ rhetoric around active/democratic learning does not match their in-class behaviour. Namely, his data (collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and classroom observation) revealed that whereas teachers claimed to emphasize skill development, exploration of personal beliefs, and active involvement in civic life alongside knowledge acquisition, their assessment practices focused disproportionately on
the latter. Similarly, Evans identified a significant discrepancy between interview data—which highlighted performance-based instructional practices—and observational data, which found little evidence of such strategies in practice. Happily, less rhetorical examples of efforts to embrace active, student-centered pedagogies also exist. A great many of the studies examining such initiatives are strictly predictive—dealing with the influence of the various pedagogies examined on students’ intentions with regards to their future political participation. Nevertheless, this research provides invaluable insights to the kinds of pedagogical experiences that participants in this research are likely to highlight as having contributed to their formal politicization.

2.3a Classroom Climate

Among the many proposed pedagogical approaches to fostering formal political engagement, the maintenance of an ‘open’ classroom climate is perhaps most frequently examined (Campbell, 2008; Gainous & Martens, 2012; Hess & Avery, 2008; Vetter, 2008; etc.). Insofar as such a climate directly contravenes the ordinarily authoritarian nature of schooling, it is also an important example of the kind of non-reformist reform advocated by the aforementioned anarchistic scholar Brian Martin—one which, rather than bolster the status quo by merely making it more tolerable or less egregiously unjust, fundamentally subverts it. Campbell (2008) defines an open classroom climate as one which facilitates the discussion of political issues, leading to students’ acquisition of political knowledge, and—more importantly—facilitating their cultivation of a disposition amenable to democratic participation. His analysis of data from the 1999 IEA Civic Education Study (CIVED) determined that of 14-year-olds in some 28 participating countries, those who reported having experienced more open classroom climates were subsequently less conflict-averse, more civically knowledgeable, and more likely to indicate their intention to vote as adults.
Significantly, Campbell’s study also determined that “[a]n open classroom climate has more impact on adolescents with lower SES [socioeconomic status]” (p. 449; emphasis added) suggesting that pedagogical interventions intended to foster (in)formal political participation may also have a unique ability to compensate for the social relations which ordinarily ensure that youth from privileged demographics are afforded far more opportunities to engage in formal politics (Bachner, 2011).

In their analysis of the same CIVED data examined by Campbell, Gainous and Martens (2012) argue similarly that students appear to be differentially affected by their exposure to open classroom climates and otherwise democratic pedagogies. Finding, once again, that an open classroom climate and increased classroom discussion positively influence students’ intentions with regards to formal and informal political participation, the researchers also determined that these effects are unevenly distributed across segments of the student body. According to their analysis, students with a higher SES appear to be substantially less influenced, overall, by school-based civic education—no matter its method of delivery. For these participants, home is by far the more influential environment in terms of political socialization. For low-SES students, meanwhile, the positive effects of classroom discussion, curricular breadth, and so on are amplified. Quite problematically, these findings lead Gainous & Martens to suggest that – as a cost saving measure – schools “make civic education contingent on student testing, particularly in later grades, exempting those students who demonstrate proficiency in civics from further instruction” (p. 254). Despite the obvious ethical issues raised by this proposal (for instance, the likelihood that it would segregate students along socioeconomic lines and promote chiefly those easily quantifiable forms of ‘civic proficiency’) the findings it derives from suggest that education may have an important ability to mitigate the well-documented influence of demographic factors such as family SES
over patterns of political participation, and to increase youths’ formal political engagement more broadly speaking. That said, existing research also shows – time and time again – that “[s]tudents from low-income, minority, and immigrant families tend to have fewer civic opportunities\textsuperscript{3} than students from middle class, majority culture families” (Hahn, 2003, p. 8). This suggests that even insofar as exposure to an open classroom climate has the capacity to counteract social reproduction among students, that exposure is, itself, differentially accessible.

Consideration of the degree to which open discussion of controversial topics in the classroom might help foster students’ immediate and future political engagement arguably dates back to Sidney Verba and Gabriel Almond’s hugely influential text, *The Civic Culture* (1963). Dubbed “the first systematic study of political culture” (Ersson & Lane, 2008, p. 420), it surveyed adults in five countries (the U.S., U.K., Italy, Germany, and Mexico) about their political orientations and backgrounds, and determined that adults who recalled high rates of participation in classroom discussions and rule-making were significantly more likely to feel capable of influencing government through formal and informal channels alike. This is in keeping with a later observation from Torney-Purta (2001) that “experience with democracy at school and civic engagement in the broader society are reasonably congruent” (p. 286). Although it highlights the potential for student involvement in school and classroom decision-making to foster lifelong political participation, Almond and Verba’s research also raises troubling questions of causation. Specifically, students who reported they were able to participate in school decision making, *but chose not to*, scored lower on Almond and Verba’s subjective competence scale than participants who reported that they simply ‘could not’ participate as students. This suggests that – rather than helping to realize otherwise dormant

\textsuperscript{3} ‘Civic opportunities’ are defined elsewhere by Hahn as including pedagogical practices such as classroom-based discussion of “controversial political issues,” and “interactive discussion-based civic education.”
personal agency and political competence – opportunities for student participation in school
decision making may merely be dominated by those self-confident, civic-minded students
who would inevitably become politically engaged anyways. As the researchers themselves
put it, “our data on the impact of family and school participation on later political attitudes
suggest, at best, that there is some connection. But how strong the connection is, under what
circumstances it is more or less close, and the process by which the connection is made are
questions that cannot yet be answered” (p. 361). Fortunately, such ambiguity is resolved
somewhat by the aforementioned studies of CIVED data, which again suggest that it is
precisely those youths who would ordinarily be least likely to participate politically who are
most affected by pedagogical interventions intended to provoke their engagement. What’s
more, this appears to be especially true of youths’ formal political engagement – the chief
preoccupation of this study – relative to their informal political participation (Gallego, 2008).

2.3b Experiential Learning

As discussed, many of the existing studies considering the relationship between
pedagogy and formal political engagement are limited by their essentially predictive nature
(Almond & Verba’s survey of adult research participants excepted). There is some limited
longitudinal research in this area, however, most of which seems to concentrate on the impact
of learner participation in government simulation exercises, or other similarly experiential
pedagogical initiatives. For example, research by Bernstein and Meizlish (2003) considers
the apparent effects of students’ participation in an elaborate government simulation exercise,
spanning three weeks of an introductory political science course at Eastern Michigan
University. By interviewing two groups of students enrolled in the course – one of which
completed a fairly transmission-oriented plan of study, the other of which participated in the
simulation, taking on roles as members of congress, White House staffs, lobbyists,
journalists, etc. – they arrived at some important and surprising insights.

Naturally, the researchers’ expectation was that the effects of the simulation on later levels of political participation would prove to be more dramatic and lasting than the effects of the comparatively conventional learning experienced by the ‘control group.’ Somewhat counter-intuitively, however, providing students with such a “concrete, tangible experience” (p. 202) did not appear to substantially alter their later political behaviour. In fact, Bernstein and Meizlish were forced to concede that students who completed the simulation were actually less likely to participate politically (according to formal and informal metrics) three years later than students who did not. These findings underscore the need for further research that consults with learners themselves about how they have been affected by particular pedagogies, rather than merely measuring their voting/non-voting behaviour, etc.

Somewhat reassuringly, other longitudinal studies have found more positive associations between experiential pedagogies and subsequent political participation. For instance, Cynthia Rocha’s (2000) research in the context of a Masters of Social Work course revealed that school-based participation in a service learning initiative provided students with opportunities to acquire skills that equipped them to more easily participate in formal politics following graduation. Like Bernstein and Meizlish, Rocha relied on a ‘control group’ to distinguish between the effects of other forms of political socialization (e.g. familial) and the effects of their service learning experiences. Whereas Bernstein and Meizlish found little connection between more active pedagogy and later political participation, however, Rocha determined that students who planned and executed a policy change effort in the course were ultimately more likely than students in the control group to be members of coalitions, work on specific change efforts, write to elected officials, conduct internet research on political issues, and so on (p. 60). Encouraging as they are, however, Rocha’s findings only begin to
address what she refers to as a scarcity of “evidence on service learning’s effectiveness… especially with regard to its effect on political participation after students graduate” (p. 54).

Again, these somewhat contradictory research findings further underscore the need for additional research that asks young adults, themselves, which pedagogies they deem most influential in their decisions to participate actively in formal politics.

2.3c Assessment and Evaluation

Another important area of study, though far from the last, pertaining to the relationship between pedagogy and political engagement revolves around the incongruence between conventional assessment practices and rhetorical commitments to student-centered, active, and transformational learning. Whereas pedagogical efforts to engender politically participatory tendencies in youth ostensibly strive to encourage cooperation, creativity, and the collective construction of knowledge, traditional methods of assessment and evaluation promote competition, individualism, and the frequent segregation of ‘at risk’ students.

Otherwise put, “[a]ssessment in citizenship that marks out success and failure and discriminates between them may be inappropriate for a subject which seeks to promote inclusion” (Halstead and Pike, 2006, p. 153). As well, negative assessments in relation to standardized metrics are liable to have a corresponding impact on some students’ interest in becoming politically participatory due to the fact that “a decreased sense of engagement with the life of the school and a low sense of self-efficacy are not strong foundations for nurturing engaged and effective citizens” (Jerome, 2008, p. 2).

Accepting, therefore, that a low sense of self-efficacy resulting from poor assessments is likely to translate into a similarly diminished sense of political efficacy, research findings that suggest youth having performed poorly on standardized tests feel “degraded,” “ashamed,” “humiliated,” and “stressed” (Kearns, 2011) are deeply troubling.
Indeed, the fact that low-SES youth are substantially more likely to perform poorly according to such metrics serves as evidence that the use of conventional assessment practices may negate the previously discussed potential of pedagogically coherent citizenship education efforts to counteract the forces that ordinarily reproduce social inequalities in political participation. Furthermore, conventional assessment practices – and standardized testing in particular – dramatically encumber educators’ abilities to adapt learning environments to particular groups of students as advocated by such influential theorists as Dewey and Freire.

Notably, these important critiques of normative assessment and evaluation practices in the context of educating for active, participatory citizenship need not altogether preclude the use of assessment as a tool. Jerome (2008) argues compellingly that there is value to student assessment, including its benefit to students for goal-setting and improvement and its usefulness to teachers seeking to identify best practices. Where teachers strive to implement more equitable assessment practices that retain these values, however, they are often constrained in their ability to do so (Kelly & Brandes, 2008). Nevertheless, some anti-oppressive assessment practices have gained purchase in recent years, and these tend to align neatly with many of the other pedagogical practices explored herein (e.g. grading based on process and effort rather than outcome, or involving students in the determination of assessment criteria). As well, high-profile boycotts of standardized testing initiatives (as in the city of Seattle) are subverting hegemonic assessment practices and generating solidarity between teachers and students. Innovative and inclusive assessment practices, experiential learning initiatives, and open classroom environments are therefore likely – though far from the only – examples of pedagogical initiatives that may be cited by research participants as having contributed to their formal (and informal) politicization.

Despite its relatively routine failure to consider the arguably compliant nature of
formal political participation, the existing literature on the relationship between pedagogy and political engagement provides a potent reminder of the importance of a coherent praxis of teaching. If, as educators, we fail to understand youth as agentic participants in their own educations, their perceived disinterest in political participation should come as no surprise. Of course as discussed, the literature also reveals this disinterest to be something of a myth. Indeed Canadian young adults are only ‘apathetic’ according to particular, normative – and thus deeply limited – metrics. Nevertheless, research new and old also suggests that by facilitating classroom climates where dialogue is integral to learning; by understanding learning as something that happens in conjunction with lived experience; and by foregrounding student well-being in the assessment process, educators may seize upon vital opportunities to acknowledge that young people are far from inherently passive, and may indeed contribute to their political proactivity.
3. Data and Methods

3.1 Epistemological Framework

My selection of a qualitative research framework, relying on life-history methods of
data collection, is justified in a variety of ways which I will briefly delineate here. To begin
with, this methodological choice is informed by the fact that the bulk of existing research
focused on determining the effects of pedagogy on political participation has been
quantitative and correspondingly positivistic in nature. This research has its own value to be
sure, and has provided crucial insights into the varied effects of exposure to particular
pedagogies in diverse learning contexts. Above all, it has confirmed that if youth are afforded
opportunities to learn in cooperative, active, and democratic environments, they are
significantly more likely to become politically participatory citizens in young adulthood.
Such quantitative studies are deeply limited, however, in their capacity to further explicate
how this relationship emerges and what effect it truly has, as articulated by formally
participatory young citizens themselves. Creswell (1998), meanwhile, highlights a variety of
reasons qualitative methods might be suitable to researchers, including “when the research
question starts with a how or a what, as opposed to a why… [and] if a topic needs to be
explored” (Lamm, 2009, p. 40; emphasis added). Thus, qualitative methods such as the
narrative style of interview-based research which I have employed signify a unique
opportunity to explore the relationship between pedagogy and politicization retrospectively,
and in full recognition of its complexity and contextual specificity – albeit in
acknowledgement of the fact that even qualitative methods retain a troubling tendency to
seek to “tidy things up” (Humm, 1989, p. 52), by over-emphasizing linearity and assuming causation.

Furthermore, this study’s use of qualitative methods derives from my explicit
rejection of the epistemological notion – so easily (albeit falsely) reinforced by quantitative methodologies – that research can be value-free and/or apolitical. As discussed throughout this thesis, I am distinctly uninterested in arriving at a formulaic method for increasing young Canadians’ formal political participation simply for its own sake and with no political agenda whatsoever. Rather, it strives to conceive of diverse possibilities re: the use of pedagogy as a tool for the promotion of formal political participation by justice-oriented young adults, distinctly preoccupied with progressive social change. As such, this research seeks “not simply to say why the world is as it is but to provide us with space to think how it could be different” (Schratz & Walker, 1995, p. 125). Similarly, this study embraces subjectivity—whose influence the quantitative research tradition has long sought to diminish. As Carter and Little (2007) so convincingly argue, a researcher’s epistemic position (theory of knowledge) must inform her methodological choices, which together determine the very concrete methods she will use to investigate her research question(s). In this way, my epistemological conviction that truth is a fundamentally subjective entity and that, indeed, “authenticity is more useful than ‘truth’” (Kara, 2013, p. 78), dictates my selection of a qualitative, interview-based research methods for the purposes of this study… and my methodological choices overall.

3.2 Recruitment and Data Collection

As discussed in the introduction, data for this study come from ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18-34 year old Canadians, identifying as left-wing and formally engaged in politics. All participants were born in Canada, four of them to at least one immigrant parent. One participant spent a significant portion of her childhood in Latin America. Altogether, six women and four men were interviewed. Interviewees were recruited from across Canada: in Toronto, Ottawa, the Kawartha Lakes area of Ontario, Vancouver,
Montreal, northern Manitoba, and Calgary. To be included in the study, participants had to be conventionally engaged in politics, but most were engaged in unconventional forms of political expression and social justice organizing as well. The nature of participants’ conventional engagement ranged from working as an elected member of parliament, to volunteering for leftist political parties, to participating in non-partisan ‘get-out-the-vote’ initiatives, to campaigning on behalf of progressive candidates in municipal, provincial, and federal elections.

Interviewees were recruited through political parties’ youth wings (specifically, the Green Party and NDP) and through a variety of not-for-profits engaged in various forms of civic engagement promotion (e.g. Apathy is Boring, Civix, Samara Canada, Equal Voice, Maytree Foundation). Interviews lasted between forty minutes and two hours and were either conducted in person (at a location of the participant’s choosing) or over Skype. My conversations with participants typically began with the nature of their current political engagement and then followed a life history approach, cataloguing some of their earliest experiences of political participation and moving through their formal schooling years in a chronological fashion. Kristin Haglund (2004) suggests that such an approach is especially well-suited to research intended to yield “data that help researchers gain insight into how past events and relationships might influence current phenomena” (p. 1309). Whereas the ‘phenomena’ that Haglund is exploring are health-related (predominantly to do with teens’ decisions to remain abstinent), her assertion that life history methods can help connect past experiences to present-day decisions affirms the suitability of these methods to my research—which is seeks to retrospectively link pre-adult pedagogical experiences with participants’ current political participation. As well, Haglund reminds us that life history methods are grounded in the “recognition of the agency of each individual and the essential role of context in the living of a life” (p. 1309) again rendering them well-suited to this
investigation, which is similarly grounded in its continual recognition of participants’ agency. Despite their alignment with life history methods in many ways, however, these interviews did not take a strictly chronological approach. This is largely due to this study’s preoccupation with one ‘variable’ in particular (pedagogy) as opposed to a great many (e.g. parental relationships, friendships, extracurricular activity, socioeconomic status, religious affiliations, etc.) except insofar as these relate to a participant’s exposure to particular pedagogical experiences. Nevertheless, interviews will strive to acknowledge the fundamentally “narrative nature of human beings” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 161) and reflect a commitment to view “respondents… as narrators and interview data as stories” (p. 165). Thus, interviews also explored participants’ relationships with family and friends, and participants’ attitudes towards different forms of political participation.

3.3 Data Analysis

Following the interviews, my data analysis process closely resembled that employed by Jennifer Silva (2012) in her recent research on working class youths’ transition to adulthood:

“Interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the respondent and completely transcribed. During the first round of analysis, I relied on open coding, closely reading interview transcripts line by line to discover trends in the data. I focused on identifying incidents, as recalled by respondents themselves, that marked critical personal junctures in the transition to adulthood” (p. 510)

Like Silva, I focused on particular pedagogical events (as well as more general practices) which participants themselves identified as formative. I also concentrated on participants’ conceptions of the relationship between conventional and unconventional political participation. Finally, I paid close attention to the manner in which familial relationships appeared to have influenced participants’ experiences of particular pedagogies, and the
degree to which their conventional political engagement might be considered critically conscious and/or strategic. (Findings on participants’ apparent criticality – or lack thereof – are described in Chapter Five, in relation to the Marxist theoretical framework mentioned earlier, and with a view to identifying some significant limitations of this study.) Overall, participants’ accounts confirmed that pedagogical interventions in formal schooling contexts have an impressive ability to engender participatory tendencies and capacities among youth. In particular, data provided ample support for the participation-fostering character of the pedagogies identified in the preceding literature review, as well as some other less-researched practices. At the same time, however, interview data revealed that these same pedagogical experiences do not necessarily promote any kind of critical analysis of liberal democracy itself, nor the potentially profound limitations of formal engagement therein.
4. Findings

In addition to its efforts to examine the degree to which ostensibly participation-inducing pedagogical initiatives (un)critically endorse normative forms of political participation, something that differentiates this study from much of the existing literature on pedagogy and political activity is its retrospective approach. As discussed, a vast majority of previous studies mentioned in the preceding literature review are effectively predictive. One extensive survey of youth in four European countries (Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the UK), for instance, asked participants “what kinds of political activities they might engage in when they were adult” (Ross & Dooly, 2010, p. 48). Similarly, Quintelier and Hooghe (2013) test the assumption that “an open, democratic and participatory school climate will be positively associated with the propensity to engage in various forms of civic participation” (p. 570) by questioning students about their future (i.e. intended) political participation on four scales: (1) protest activity, (2) electoral participation, (3) formal political activity, and (4) informal political activity\(^4\). Their central finding that students’ perceptions “of a participatory democratic climate are positively associated with [their] future likelihood of political participation” (p. 576) is therefore premised on an assumption that students will, in fact, behave in adulthood as they imagine they will at fourteen years old.

Such research is not at all without merit, but is limited by its fundamentally speculative nature, and its tendency to conceive of young people as ‘citizens in the making,’ rather than legitimate political subjects in the here and now (Gordon, 2008). Very little research, meanwhile, assesses the actual lasting effects of preadult exposure to such pedagogical experiences. Indeed, as Pamela Carriveau (2003) observes, “remarkably little connecting political activity and lessons designed to teach citizenship is substantiated” (p. 2-\(^4\)

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\(^4\) Formal political participation is conceptualized by Quintelier and Hooghe as encapsulating activities related to political parties. Informal political participation includes participating in political discussions or writing an op ed.
3). The few longitudinal studies that do exist in this area tend to be confined to the previously discussed realm of simulation-based learning. Regrettably, the time constraints associated with producing a Master’s thesis preclude this study from establishing such the kind of explicit relationship between pre-adult learning and young adult political participation that a longitudinal study would permit. As well, a study that treats particular pedagogical experiences as isolated variables with easily quantifiable effects on learners’ subsequent political participation would be incoherent with the epistemological framework outlined above. Rather, this thesis signifies a retrospective exploration of the relationship between pedagogy and politicization, alongside those young adult Canadians who attribute their formal civic engagement (at least in part) to past pedagogical experiences.

The following portion of this thesis arranges these pedagogical experiences into four primary categories. Crucially, this is not to suggest that the pedagogies which appear to promote political engagement are easily or straightforwardly categorized. Experiences delineated in each of these four sections could conceivably be filed elsewhere instead, and are all dialectically related. Assessment practices identified by participants as formative, for example, are informed by and inform the instructional practices of the teachers who embrace them. Likewise, classroom environments influence teachers’ ability to speak freely, just as they are utterly determined by the willingness of teachers to take that risk. As well, it is worth noting that many participants in this study attributed their formidable engagement in formal politics at least in part to particular historical moments as well as pedagogical occurrences. Kevin, a first generation Canadian and co-organizer of a major get-out-the-vote initiative, for instance, cited a prominent mayoral candidate’s campaign as an ‘activating’ moment. Municipal organizer and electoral educator Jenn referenced Ontario’s 2007 referendum on electoral reform. Dedicated NDP volunteer and campaigner Ali spoke of the party’s assent to official opposition status under Jack Layton’s leadership in 2011. Lucas,
who works for a civic engagement charity in Ontario, recalled the teachers’ strike during Mike Harris’s tenure as the province’s premier. The activating nature of these historical moments warrants further examination and might indeed provide fodder for subsequent study. Ultimately, however, each participant in this study was sure to identify numerous pedagogical moments which they say served as catalysts for their formal political engagement, and – in many cases – contributed to the transformative character of the historical moments mentioned above.

4.1 Democratic Classrooms: “They were excited to hear what we had to say.”

Chief among the many pedagogical experiences cited by research participants as central to their politicization was having the opportunity to play an active role in determining course content, a practice very much in keeping with the literature re: ‘open’ classroom climates. One such account came from Ali, the 18-year-old son of a Filipino mother and Pakistani father who operate a convenience store in downtown Toronto. Since he was in middle school, Ali has been actively engaged in formal politics, most notably as a repeat volunteer for the NDP, during and between election campaigns. Here, Ali enthusiastically describes how exciting it was for him to be able to give feedback on the curricular design of a high school course:

“In one of my classes we were able to give feedback on what we’d like to see in the class at the beginning of the year… It was a newish teacher who had only been there for a couple of years so she said, ‘If you have any suggestions, it’s the first time I’m teaching this class, so let me know if there’s anything you’re interested in specifically…’ [She] didn’t come in with no classroom plan like ‘Okay, choose whatever you want to do!’ Instead [she] had a plan, but [she] also asked for options and let us give our opinions, and I think that was really important and really interesting.”
The importance of choice was a recurring theme in my interview with Ali, who also mentioned another teacher’s willingness to let students choose the materials used in assignments (something a number of other research participants referenced as well):

“It wasn’t: ‘Here’s an article, read it.’ It was: ‘Here’s a newspaper. Open it, read whatever you like, write something that you find interesting—that you find important to talk about.’”

For Ali, the sense of autonomy derived from these opportunities to make decisions and provide feedback was hugely significant. By disrupting the hierarchical conventions of the classroom, the teachers Ali spoke about were, in his view, displaying confidence in him and his fellow students. As discussed, Ali’s exposure to this kind of a learning environment was almost certainly influenced by the fact that he attended a well-resourced high school with a relatively affluent student-body, and a highly educated and engaged parental community. For a variety of reasons, the open classroom climate described by Ali might prove more elusive in a less privileged school context. There, teachers might be more likely to fear for their job security, or less likely to acknowledge students’ active involvement in the construction of knowledge due to a greater preoccupation with standardized test scores (Gordon, 2015). Moreover, research has shown us that under-credentialed teachers are more likely to be assigned to high-minority, low-income schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004) thus negatively impacting the likelihood that students at those schools will be exposed to the innovative pedagogical practices described by Ali whom, despite his own racial-minority status, attended a predominantly white and wealthy school.

The transformative character of the democratic classroom climate described by Ali cannot be ignored, however, and was emphasized by other research participants as well. Some interviewees, like Ali, emphasized the confidence-building dimension of the ‘open’ classroom. Others simply described the degree to which they derived a greater overall sense of engagement from exposure to course content that was selected specifically for and often
by them. Lucas, for example, expressed fond memories of a grade eleven teacher who
endeavored to choose course content based on its relevance to students: “He’d just like
finesse every single piece of it so that it was grounded in experience… and relevant to our
lives,” he recalled. Similarly, Kyle – who is heavily involved in a British Columbia-based
initiative to encourage voting – described his undergraduate education as deeply
transformative because of his instructors’ flexibility and preoccupation with the relevance of
content to students:

“It was really interesting because people obviously had different things…
different topics that they were drawn to in the semester and there was enough
room for them to explore those in, I think, a meaningful way while still being
within the parameters of the class.”

Interestingly, Kyle described his classroom experiences prior to university as much less
engaging, chiefly due to their failure to connect curriculum to students’ lived realities and to
the outside world:

“There wasn’t a huge connection made between… what was taught in the
classroom and what was happening in the community or things outside of
school. And I think it’s really helpful – especially for young people – to be
able to see those connections.”

Further evidence in support of the hypothesis that an open classroom climate begets
participatory tendencies among progressive youth came from participants’ many accounts of
educational spaces where teacher/student and student/student dialogue was encouraged. For
instance, Jenn (whose analysis of the relative value and function of conventional and
unconventional political participation was markedly sophisticated5) expressed her
appreciation for teachers who were willing to listen to students in a meaningful way:

“The best teachers that I had who I learned the most from were always
teachers who delivered the subject matter with passion and ingenuity, right?
And who were excited to hear what we had to say about it, which is
unfortunately fairly uncommon… And who used our interests as the jumping
off point to explore those issues.”

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5 Jenn’s analysis of the strengths and limitations of formal political participation will be examined in further
detail later in this chapter.
Other students also emphasized the empowering character of classrooms that offered space for debate and self-expression. Kevin, for instance, said repeatedly that access to classroom spaces where his he felt his “voice was heard” were instrumental to his subsequent decisions to become engaged in politics—formally and otherwise. Much like Ali, Kevin is the child of immigrant parents from the Philippines who came to Canada in the 1980s and whom Kevin describes as middle class. In high school, Kevin was enrolled in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program based on the three ‘fundamental concepts’ of holistic learning, intercultural awareness, and communication. Importantly, research has found that minority students and students from low-income backgrounds are underrepresented in most IB programs (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008), again suggesting that the type of pedagogical experience Kevin describes here may be differentially accessible to students, according to their social location:

“We would sit in a circle [and] be given a topic… and just sort of give an hour to elaborate on it. And it was always sort of mind-blowing… like my brain hurt after that class! And it was just… it was really… it was interesting. Like debates would get really heated and like… it just really allowed for our voice to come out and like have it shared with the others in the class.”

Kevin’s fellow research participants Amy and Chantal – both Canadian-born, Caucasian women in their twenties – also expressed a feeling that their exposure to pedagogies which promoted debate, dialogue, and self-expression was somehow instrumental to their becoming engaged in formal politics. “You could disagree with your classmates without being, you know, shushed,” said Amy. Longtime Green Party volunteer Chantal, meanwhile, emphasized how important it was for her to have her own beliefs and convictions challenged in a classroom context:
“You know, we’d constantly be debating current events in class and stuff and I think that classes like that really brought out the opportunity for me to like learn more about… how to have discussions about political things and like what I really believed. You know that old idea that if you challenge someone’s belief they learn more about it because they learn how to defend it… I think that’s hugely responsible for why I am politically active today.”

Overall, participants’ accounts of classroom climate as significant to their politicization tended to be deeply intertwined with their sense that curricular content was relevant to their lived experiences and interests. This is, again, fairly coherent with Freire’s ‘problem-posing’ concept of education as articulated in Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

Nevertheless, encouraging students to bring forward materials and topics they deem relevant for classroom discussion is not necessarily a politically disruptive pedagogical practice. Hierarchical classroom conventions are certainly disrupted, potentially precipitating learner engagement that would not otherwise have occurred. However, the ostensibly democratic classroom can conceivably remain a relatively apolitical and thus fundamentally reproductive place. Ultimately, unless the subject matter forwarded by students is subjected to some kind of explicitly critical inquiry, the novelty of its selection by ‘democratic’ means arguably fails to challenge convention in a meaningful way. Indeed in Pedagogy of Freedom, Freire himself later writes: “I may not agree with a given pedagogical theory of this or that author, and, of course, I ought to make my students aware of the disagreement” (1998, p. 24). With this matter of fact assertion, Freire effectively dismisses the well-documented tendency of North American teachers to avoid stating their opinions in the classroom. The subsequent section of this thesis therefore considers participants’ accounts of teachers willing to be more than just ‘democratic’—that is: willing to be overtly political.
4.2 Overtly Political Educators: “Politics in the classroom is good with me!”

There are, of course, many potential obstacles to teachers’ ability to speak freely in the average classroom. In their study of civic learning in four Ottawa secondary schools, Llewellyn, Cook and Molina (2010) write that “some teachers admitted that they were afraid to speak because of potential consequences of job security and status.” Sure enough, a fairly comprehensive review of the literature on classroom discussion of controversial topics by Diana Hess and Patricia Avery (2008) reveals that students’ accounts of unfettered conversation around controversial issues and teachers’ corresponding commitments to political discussion are often belied by classroom level observation, wherein empirical evidence of truly political discussion is scarce. The researchers also write that “discussions of issues are not necessary in order for students to label their classroom climate as open” (p. N/A). Overall, a substantial body of evidence suggests that a classroom may be deemed democratic or ‘open’ without necessarily offering its students access to a meaningful political analysis of any kind (Hess, 2007). Nevertheless, many of my research participants did speak of teachers who were willing to be overtly political as well as anti-authoritarian. For example, one interviewee – a civic engagement promoter named Emma – described her high school as a very politically-charged place: “I’ve never been in a schooling environment where… people’s political views aren’t known,” she said. Moreover, although many participants acknowledged various factors that might discourage educators from ‘speaking their minds,’ they universally applauded those teachers willing to do so. Ali even said that if he ever had kids of his own, he’d encourage their teachers to take up ‘touchy’ subjects in the classroom:

“The teachers that I had were always very vocal with their opinions, to be honest… If [a politician] was screwing them over they would say so. They’d

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be willing to talk about that. Maybe not in front of the whole class, but certainly with me and other students who were interested... Often it’s a touchy issue and teachers may not want to cause debate, but... personally I would like to see more of that. And I think that one day, if I have kids, I’ll [make sure their teachers know] that talking about politics in the classroom is good with me!”

Interestingly, some participants also spoke of the influential nature of pedagogical experiences involving interactions with overtly political teachers whose opinions they disagreed with. On the one hand, the finding that disagreement was central to some participants’ formal politicization is in keeping with mainstream assertions that classrooms play an important role in teaching young people how to contend with differences of opinion in ‘civilized’ ways—a supposed tenet of democratic participation, and a pedagogic goal many deem central to education for citizenship. Kevin’s account of disagreeing with a high school history teacher, for example, seems to focus on the pair’s ability to nevertheless ‘get along,’ implying that what is significant about disagreement in the classroom is its role in helping students develop a capacity to collaborate despite disagreement:

“I did have like a very right wing... probably like a libertarian history teacher. He was very open—very like decided on his political stance... But I would always eat lunch with him. Like I wasn’t ever afraid to approach him even though I accepted that he was a conservative.”

At the same time, however, interviews also raised the possibility that disagreement played a somewhat more intriguing role in students’ politicization—inspiring them to become politically active by crystallizing political convictions they had not fully claimed ownership of, until exposed to their antitheses. Daphne, for example, said she had left-leaning teachers by and large, but that it was arguably her most conservative teacher (a university professor, in this case) who played the largest role in compelling her to become engaged in formal politics. In fact, Daphne described her vehement reaction to this particular educator’s views – which she viewed as deeply regressive – as integral to her eventual decision to run for political office:
“I was so horrified by the kind of perspective that was being put forth by a respected academic institution… the narrow-mindedness and conservative views that were being peddled as a mainstream approach that we should all sort of take… It was another check on the list of why [I felt] we needed to struggle against injustice!”

For Daphne, the political persuasions of this particular teacher (expressed with an openness the literature suggests is unconventional) were activating by virtue of their moral depravity. Whereas Emma, Ali, and others found political role models among their teachers, Daphne found an adversary—one that compelled her to become politically engaged as never before!

Despite these examples of teachers willing to share their political opinions with students, other research participants gave accounts which confirmed that classrooms can be seemingly democratic spaces without necessarily being political spaces. Samantha – who we’ll learn more about momentarily – described some of her grade school teachers as uniquely engaging, referencing their proclivity for ‘hands on’ assignments and interactivity, but gave no examples of overtly political teaching. Amy, meanwhile, spoke of frequent ‘political’ discussions with one of her high school teachers, but admitted that she was surprised to learn – well after graduating – that he was a Liberal party member, suggesting that this particular teacher managed facilitate discussion without ever sharing his own stance on the issue at hand. Of course, we know that classroom environments which prohibit authentically political discussion of issues related to social justice and other ‘controversial’ topics are, in their own way, deeply political spaces—tacitly endorsing the status quo by failing to acknowledge that it might be contested. Nevertheless, they are ‘apolitical’ insofar as they do little to imbue learners with a critical analysis of any kind. In many respects, the maintenance of such an apolitical veneer in the classroom is itself a formidable achievement. After all, as Amy put it, opportunities for political discussions abound in the average classroom:
“It’s like: Why do you have 29 other kids in your classroom and you like sit in a desk where you’re six inches apart from each other ’cause there’s not enough physical space in the classroom? Or like… I don’t know: You see people in your school with like developmental disabilities and they’re relegated to like the other side of the school in like a special classroom and you don’t actually see them. Like, why is that?”

Ultimately, participants’ examples of truly political discussions with teachers – that is, discussions wherein teachers candidly and honestly shared their own perspectives on controversial issues – were limited, but significant. When participants did reference such encounters, it was always with a sense that they had contributed in important ways to their later decisions to become involved in formal politics. Thus, my data suggests that by routinely engaging in self-censorship (Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina, 2010; Hess & Avery, 2008; Hess, 2007) teachers may be relinquishing an important opportunity to encourage students to participate in formal politics, and to pursue social change more broadly speaking.

4.3 Innovative Approaches to Assessment: “She encouraged us to produce things.”

As predicted by the literature, many of my research participants were also quick to cite instances of informal/unconventional assessment practices as having contributed to their engagement, first in school and subsequently in politics. Kyle spoke at length about the fact that his undergraduate education involved very little formal testing and no examinations whatsoever, instead consisting of evaluative elements such as op-ed writing and workshop facilitation. Chantal, meanwhile, spoke fondly of educators who agreed to allow her to create shareable video blogs instead of writing conventional essays—a practice she says helped her feel significantly more engaged in class, and contributed to her later engagement in formal politics as well. Jenn – whose graduate school course work involved collaborating with local community members on a major research initiative – expressed a keen awareness of how distinctive such opportunities are:
“She encouraged us to produce things for our assignments… instead of writing papers. Like, we were allowed to write papers if we wanted to, but there was also a group project. And most of the time the group project in grad school is you and two other people preparing a seminar together or something. But my group ended up putting together a website that was sort of like a wiki plus an information resource plus like a live journal… And just having the opportunity to do a project that was like based in the community was really interesting… but it’s also rare. Very rare.”

Whereas Jenn emphasized the collaborative and community-based nature of her assignments, other participants paid close attention to the way assignments were evaluated. In some cases, the task itself was not hugely unconventional, but projects such as essays and book reviews were graded in unconventional ways. Here, Lucas describes one such technique, employed by a World Issues teacher at his high school:

“We’d periodically have assignments to do that would be evaluated not by percentage grades or letter grades, but by level and the level wasn’t reflective of the product, but of the process. So he tried to put forward this idea that thinking… thinking is of a certain quality and what… what you’re representing on the page is a certain level of thinking and… and to simply uh… reiterate the facts, like demonstrate comprehension that’s like level two thinking and then if you’re able to like contextualize the facts then it’s level three thinking and if you’re able to like add an analysis or look for unknowns or to… like any of those other, higher level things, that’s level four thinking.”

In all of these varied accounts of unconventional approaches to student assessment, a number of things stand out, many of which are true of other pedagogical practices examined herein as well. First, participants routinely described the sense of agency and autonomy afforded by pedagogies that were uniquely accommodating to student choice and preference as central to their engagement in school and beyond. Second, interviews regularly focused on the importance of those classroom experiences which emphasized the learning process over its outcome or ‘product.’ Both of these research findings are in keeping with Halstead and Pike’s Foucauldian analysis of assessment in contexts of learning for engaged citizenship, wherein they argue that “If apathy towards the voting process is endemic among 18- to 24-year-olds and this is related to their perception of power within society then the introduction
of a mandatory assessment of Citizenship in schools, an instance of ‘disciplinary power,’ may not be the best way to convince young people to vote” (2006, p. 154). Third – and relatedly – my data suggests that flexibility was often an important element of participants’ learning, and that standardized testing metrics which emphasize limited kinds of individual achievement generally discouraged engagement. As evidenced by the above interview excerpts, participants’ accounts of the assignment and assessment practices most relevant to their engagement in politics (and in general) also tended to emphasize the relationship between tasks assigned in the classroom and the realities of the ‘outside world’ Thus, standardized evaluative mechanisms that assume a universal (i.e. white, male, middle-class, etc.) ‘outside world’ are antithetical to student engagement. Finally, participants’ engagement within school contexts seemed to be reasonably congruent with their engagement beyond these contexts, and in formal politics specifically. By and large, interviewees described a level of engagement in school-based activities and communities as ‘giving way’ to subsequent engagement in politics. In this sense, the evaluative practices that enabled students to feel uniquely engaged in classroom spaces become hugely relevant any study of the pedagogical practices that might foment young progressives’ formal political participation.

4.4 School/Classroom Size: “There was a real sense of togetherness.”

Notably, many of the research participants who highlighted the significant role played by the kind of democratic/political classroom climates and assessment practices described in the preceding sections also discussed the relatively small size of their classes and the tight-knit nature of their varied school communities. Kevin, for instance, was enrolled in an International Baccalaureate program that assigned no more than approximately 8-10 students to a single class. Similarly, Amy – who now works as a political pollster and volunteers on
election campaigns – referred to her high school as hitting the ‘sweet spot’ in terms of institutional size, arguing that “in a bigger school, it’s easier to fall to the side and let other people take up space and… I didn’t feel like that. Like, people would notice if I wasn’t doing anything.” Daphne – who is now an elected member of the NDP’s federal caucus – echoed these sentiments about the importance of familiarity and school/classroom size. “We were a very tight cohort,” she recalled. “We went to school together basically since kindergarten and there was a real sense of togetherness.” Overall, respondents’ repeated assertions about the value of intimate learning environments suggest that exposure to the kinds of activating pedagogies discussed above may become more elusive with the persistent expansion of class sizes across Canada (Bascia, 2010).

Lucas seemed to have carefully considered the influence of school and classroom size over pedagogical practices and overall learning environment before we spoke. Here, he describes the nature of the transition from family to school as one’s primary community as central to one’s sense of engagement—political and otherwise:

“The family acts as one’s opening onto the social reality, I think. [It] allows you to encounter other people for the first time in a safe manner, hopefully. And… I think the growth to an elementary school community of like 100 people was a healthy escalation of that social reality. It was an easy enough transition that I wasn’t overwhelmed or shocked or alienated into silence or like indifference or confusion… We weren’t made to feel a stranger to the community or the process of learning.”

Lucas now works for a (non-partisan) charity that promotes civic engagement in various forms, often with an emphasis on declines in formal political participation among young adults. Like Jenn’s, his analysis of the implications of formal political participation in a liberal democratic context was notably sophisticated—suggestive of a conscious awareness of the alienating capacity of representative democracy. This portion of my interview with Lucas will be examined in greater detail presently, but already we can see how the above quote begins to illustrate the importance of the family in determining the varied effects of
research participants’ pedagogical experiences on their conceptions of liberal democratic political participation. Meantime, however, this quote also reminds us once more how essential it is to acknowledge the relative privilege of my research participants—Lucas, in particular. At 26 years old, Lucas is a Canadian-born, cis-gendered, Caucasian man. His family is of British descent and has lived in Canada for many generations. They are upper-middle class and Lucas attended a small, affluent, French Immersion school. His father was a public servant and his mother a writer and editor. The impact of particular pedagogical experiences on Lucas’s political participation – however significant – must therefore be examined alongside the privileged context of his education and overall upbringing. Nevertheless, the relative privilege of research participants such as Lucas does not negate the insights that may be derived from their testimony—which unfailingly suggests that pedagogy can play an essential role in helping progressive young adults from varied backgrounds become formally political.

Thus, the suggestion that expanding class sizes may limit educators’ ability to facilitate the formation of the types of learning environments described herein is deeply troubling. While the negative effects of expanding class sizes on student achievement⁷ are well-documented (e.g. Fritjof Krassel & Heinesenc, 2014; Ehrenberg et al, 2001; Chapman & Ludlow, 2010; etc.), this less easily ‘measurable’ impact of large class sizes in an era of budget cuts and staff reductions remains relatively unexamined by the literature. According to my participants’ accounts, however, there is a significant relationship between class size and the types of pedagogical experiences described as central to learners’ development as politically engaged progressives. Although it is beyond the scope and indeed the theoretical aims of this study to confirm the ‘causal’ nature of this relationship, participants’ repeated references to intimate and unusually small learning environments as uniquely engaging and

⁷ NB: In most studies on the effects of small/large class size, student ‘achievement’ is typically measured according to students’ standardized test scores and other similarly normative metrics.
politically stimulating spaces warrants careful recognition and further exploration.

4.5 Conclusions

Woven through all my participants’ accounts of the pedagogical experiences described here was a collective emphasis on respect. Across difference and despite substantial variations in the criticality of their analyses, interviewees emphasized the politically transformative nature of pedagogical experiences that simply involved teachers displaying respect for students. “I can recall having teachers who had a lot of respect for – and confidence in – their students,” said Lucas. Chantal described herself as a ‘problem kid,’ and said she was always very grateful for teachers who “facilitated that rather than try to push [her] into the norm.” Ali put it slightly differently:

“I think at the end of the day when you feel like a teacher or someone of authority believes in you and they tell you, ‘I know you can do this.’ Like, ‘I’m putting my trust in you to do something…’ It helps you. It just builds your confidence as a person.”

Samantha, who was quite unique among my research participants – having dropped out of high school at age fifteen and later graduated by completing the GED exam – attributed a similar kind of confidence to a series of interactions she had with one of her first bosses—the supervisor at the full-time job she got when she was just seventeen years old:

“I started as a temp and then got hired full-time, and then I got a few promotions and… I had a boss there that really taught me that I could do whatever I put my mind to and that I could really be a successful person and you know, not to give up… He really gave me that you can do whatever you want attitude.”

Like many of her more academically high-achieving counterparts, Samantha described this confidence-building encounter with someone in a position of authority as essential to her later decision to become active in formal politics (in her case, as president of a local Green Party Electoral District Association).
Alongside the confidence-building dimension of these teacher-student interactions, interviewees also emphasized (albeit to a lesser degree) the role of experiential learning and extracurricular activities in helping them build particular capacities they felt were required for later political participation. Amy’s experience of traveling to Ottawa to participate in an immersive citizenship ‘boot camp’ for high school students helped her feel like she knew more about politics than the average person—a conviction that was clearly very important to her:

“It’s a week-long almost like political boot camp, kind of. You spend the entire week on the Hill. You go around Ottawa and do lots of stuff. You have to dress up like an adult… I didn’t want to be – you know – the dumbest person there so I read Macleans a lot… No one else would read Macleans… I remember sitting on the plane going out to Ottawa… and I remember flipping through Macleans and this lady beside me just turns to me and goes, ‘How old are you?’ And I’m like, ‘I’m seventeen.’ And she’s like, ‘I’ve never seen anyone your age reading Macleans before!’”

Other participants emphasized the role of extracurricular participation (such as student council involvement) in helping them feel more confident and engaged. “I loved all that stuff,” exclaimed Jenn. “I loved being part of making things happen in the school community.”

Interestingly, much of what little longitudinal data does exist on the relationship between pre-adult learning in school contexts and political participation in early adulthood in fact pertains to assessments of the lasting effects of exposure to such extracurricular activities. McFarland and Thomas (2006), for example, identify a variety of ways that extracurricular activities have the potential to contribute to students’ political socialization. Central among these is their capacity to heighten self-esteem. Crucially, however, the authors also highlight the fact that students with high self-esteem may be more likely to enroll in extracurricular activities to begin with, thus raising important questions about the degree to which the apparent relationship between extracurricular involvement and political
participation is, in fact, causal. Elsewhere, Elizabeth Smith (1999) seeks to account for the possibility that individuals enrolling in extracurricular activities are the same youth who – by virtue of their self-confidence, politicized parents, etc. – would ultimately become politically active regardless of preadult extracurricular participation. She too admits that her analysis is limited in terms of its ability to prove the linear nature of this relationship. My own research participants’ accounts neither confirm nor contradict the narrative that extracurricular engagement can positively influence young people’s political participation through the mechanism of confidence-building. Many described themselves as confident people in general—individuals for whom joining student council or the debate team was a natural extension of their social lives as opposed to some kind of triumph over personal insecurity. Ali, however, did explicitly attribute his current self-confidence at least in part to extracurricular engagement, and seemed resolved that he would not be as confident nor as involved, if not for these experiences:

“I think school clubs were the initial factor of how I sparked my interest in getting involved and it also helped me gain confidence in myself because by being a student leader in my school I thought I was better able to you know talk to people at the doorstep, call people, ask for money, tweet, post to Facebook, and do all that stuff you do in the political system that I might have not done if I wasn’t involved in school activities in the first place.”

At first glance, this recurring emphasis on confidence-building experiences seems to align with long-standing assertions about the role of personality in mitigating people’s political participation. In their early work on participation and civic engagement, for instance, Wyszynski & Mussen (1952) write that “political activity or apathy are not functions only of the general social structure and current historical events. The personality of the individual operating within the social-historical context must also be considered” (p. 81). Later research, however, has of course revealed that although personality characteristics such as confidence (often captured within the metric of extraversion) may have a genetic component,
they are themselves hugely influenced by social relations. In particular, adolescents’ self-esteem has been revealed to be significantly mitigated by matrices of social class such as parental unemployment, family welfare status, and neighbourhood affluence (Wiltfang & Scarbecz, 1990; Mosley, 1995). In her analysis of a hallmark 2002 Supreme Court of Canada which rejected a Charter challenge against Quebec for denying full social security benefits to citizens under 30, Martha Jackman (2008) cites testimony from plaintiff Louise Gosselin which further illustrates the relationship between social location and self-confidence in poignant terms:

“There was never anyone who called me back. I was unable to present myself properly to an employer and to sell myself as a good worker. I was completely lacking in terms of self-esteem and in terms of self-confidence, my meals weren’t balanced, my social life wasn’t either. I had absolutely nothing to keep myself together, to work, so often the places were filled (p. 26).”

In her work on women’s political participation, meanwhile, Margaret Conway (2001) emphasizes three mechanisms that might lead to women’s alienation from formal politics: (1) a patriarchal political culture, (2) the differential acquisition of political skills and aptitudes, and (3) obstructionism by so-called gate-keepers at the riding level. Needless to say, however, each of these factors is rooted in the others. To examine them in isolation is theoretically incoherent. Self-confidence may thus have precipitated my participants’ exposure to the kinds of politicizing pedagogical experiences described herein, but there exposure to such pedagogies undoubtedly built self-confidence as well.

Elsewhere, these same dynamics are often discussed under the banner of empowerment. Beaumont (2010) describes empowerment as one of four factors that contribute to political efficacy, which she defines as “the belief that political change is possible and that we have the capacity to contribute to it through deliberate judgments and actions” (p. 525). Thomas Archibald and Arthur Wilson (2011), however, warn against the ubiquitous and ill-defined use of the term empowerment. Ellsworth (1989), meanwhile,
cautions that empowerment too easily becomes a tool for abstraction and “fails to challenge any identifiable social or political position, institution, or group” by instead prioritizing vague goals of ‘human betterment’ and the like (p. 307). I accept wholeheartedly these critiques, and can identify a number of instances in which they apply to my research participants’ narratives of ‘empowering’ experiences. As discussed, many participants described the mere ability to have input over course content, or the experience of a teacher expressing confidence in their abilities as empowering. Although it is certainly conceivable that their subsequent participation in formal politics might be attributable to these pedagogical experiences, there is little evidence that such interactions are themselves disruptive in any significant way. Interestingly, participants at times expressed their own misgivings about the language of empowerment. “This is a silly word and I feel iffy about it,” said Jenn before referring to her involvement in a successful justice-oriented fundraising initiative for a Canadian First Nations community as “empowering.” In summary, varied pedagogical interventions that helped promote self-confidence among participants (and might be deemed ‘empowering’) were clearly instrumental in their later decisions to become politically engaged. These same pedagogies, however, cannot be assumed to inform the character of their engagement, nor its intended outcomes. Returning once more to Elizabeth Ellsworth, the question “empowerment for what?” is left unanswered by many of my research participants’ accounts of significant pedagogical experiences. Indeed, none of the pedagogies discussed herein appeared to be related in any significant way to the level of sophistication in participants’ varied analyses of social change and political participation. Allusions to unique pedagogical practices – unreferenced by other participants – were quite rare. Variation in participants’ analyses of how social change is achieved through participation in liberal democratic politics, however, was common-place. Whereas some participants articulated a fairly developed sense of the relative merits of different forms of
political participation in different historical contexts, others were disinclined to critically assess the implications of participating conventionally in politics in a liberal democratic setting. These contradictions will be examined in the following section.
5. A Different Framework

To varying degrees, ‘participation-boosting’ pedagogical interventions do admittedly acknowledge that the apparent disengagement of youth from formal politics is as much a symptom of a broken system as it is a problem in and of itself. In particular, the flawed nature of Canada’s first past the post electoral system is widely accepted. Increasingly – as in the aforementioned study by Princeton University researchers Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, for instance – the troubling reality that policy priorities are largely dictated by corporate elites is also conceded. The flawed nature of liberal democracy itself; however, can scarcely be emphasized by those same not-for-profits seeking to promote engagement therein. And ministries of education (themselves comprised of elected officials) are doubly unlikely to imbue the curricular documents developed under their purview with a critical analysis of liberal democracy. Overall, the pedagogical project commonly referred to as ‘citizenship education’ seems generally to entail the promotion of learners’ participation in a conventional, liberal version of citizenship premised on individual rights, legal equality, and particular, reproductive kinds of participation. Paula Allman (2007) defines a reproductive praxis as one which “will serve only to reproduce the extant relations and conditions” (p. 34). Ultimately, the central preoccupation of a majority of citizenship education initiatives seems to be to indoctrinate young people into this existing, if ‘imperfect,’ framework. Thus, the familiar mantra of marchers – *the system isn’t broken; it was built this way* – is substantively ignored, as possibilities for the dismantling of ‘the system’ or the construction of new ‘systems’ are bracketed out of most pedagogical projects.

As discussed briefly in the introduction to this thesis, however, there is ample evidence that the system was indeed ‘built this way.’ Indeed, Ellen Meiksins Wood’s study of the historical emergence of liberal democracy affirms this in no uncertain terms. As Wood
points out, today’s Anglo-American notion of liberal democracy is a far cry from the ideals of ancient Athenian democracy, having evolved so that “large segments of human experience and activity, and many varieties of oppression and indignity, [are] left untouched by political equality” (2005, p. 224). This evolution, Wood asserts is entirely attributable to the internal relationship between modern democracy and capitalism, which abstracts the citizen’s legal identity from her social identity—rendering material inequality and human suffering irrelevant to any endeavor to assess the supposed health of liberal democracy. While Wood’s analysis is specific to a context of presidential American democracy, which is uniquely preoccupied with individual freedoms and private property, many of her observations are equally applicable in a parliamentary Canadian context. Sunera Thobani (2007), for instance, explores the contradictory nature of liberal democratic citizenship in Canada by juxtaposing the racialized immigrant’s experience of citizenship with the native-born white citizen’s experience and, further, with an indigenous experience of ‘political elimination’ in the name of citizenship. Ultimately, she argues that “[t]he status of citizen exalts the national subject as an equal among its compatriots, thus upholding the chimera of its equality despite its experience of deeply entrenched socio-economic inequalities” (p. 79). Rita Dhamoon’s 2009 book, Identity/Difference Politics continues to dismantle the notion that citizenship might somehow be divorced from quotidian realities of injustice based on class, race, gender, and other forms of difference in Canada. One of the ways in which Dhamoon accomplishes this formidable task is by concretizing this theoretical content through case studies. The story of Indian immigrant and naturalized Canadian citizen Bahudur Singh Bhalru, for instance, reveals that even once citizenship is granted, it remains conditional for those who are easily ‘othered.’ In the case of Bhalru – who was convicted of criminal negligence after causing a pedestrian’s death while street racing – this meant deportation to India despite full, legal status a Canadian citizen. As Dhamoon writes, “some immigrants are thus marked as
foreigners even when they have legal status in Canada and identify as Canadian” (p. 68).

The tenuous nature of the supposed equality of liberal democratic citizens in the Canadian context is further elucidated by a growing body of ethnographic research which reminds us that citizenship is fundamentally an exclusionary category, become “the modern equivalent of feudal privilege – an inherited status that greatly enhances one’s life chances” (Carens, 1987, p. 252). Daiva Stasiulis and Abigail Bakan (2005) use data from months of research alongside foreign domestic workers and nurses in Canada to cogently unmask the inequities of modern state citizenship, and the misleading nature of oft-repeated declarations that citizenship signifies “the full right to partnership in the fortunes and in the future of the nation” (Martin as cited by Chapnick, 2007, p. 444). Their findings reveal that – despite the protestations of some right-wing think tanks (e.g. Collacott, 2008) – Canadian citizenship is neither ‘easy’ to obtain nor equally beneficial for all those who have managed to obtain it. Rather, the rights Canada so proudly purports to uphold are differentially bestowed upon white citizens and racialized citizens; native-born and naturalized citizens; and above all, citizens and non-citizens. Furthermore, Stasiulis and Bakan find that these discrepancies align neatly with the needs of capitalism: so that non-citizens’ entry into Canada is facilitated by capital’s periodic need for cheap, unskilled labour… and hindered in times of high unemployment and economic stagnation. What is more, these ebbs and flows are distinctly gendered and raced, so that women of colour – who serve as what Stasiulis and Bakan refer to as the nation state’s ‘shock absorbers’ – find that their cross-border mobility is expedited by a demand for gendered labour as their female counter- parts in the developed world enter the paid workforce in ever growing numbers. Thus we are reminded of the fundamental purpose served by the abstracting of material inequality from legal equality: to facilitate the compulsive accumulation of capital by bourgeois elites. As Paula Allman writes, “the belief that liberal democracy can continue to buffer us from the worst excesses of capitalism…
regardless of the deepening and expanding of capital’s contradictions” is therefore a “truly
ludicrous utopia” (2010, p. 220).

My intention in reviewing this literature is to expose readers to a theoretical lens that
has come to complicate my overall research project and my findings significantly. As
discussed in preceding chapters, my exposure to this framework came too late for it to
properly undergird this study. This is undoubtedly in part because of my own resistance to a
Marxist analysis of the corrosive power of liberal democracy—the political system within
which I had been raised and substantively indoctrinated through my own prior schooling
experiences. Indeed, I can vividly recall a day, early in my graduate career, when I had the
opportunity to workshop my then nascent thesis topic with a group of fellow students. At the
time, I had only just begun to consider even the widely-acknowledged limitations of liberal
democracy, and had yet to be exposed to the above Marxist critique, which deems liberal
democracy not just flawed, but alienating by design. Fortunately, the same was not true of
my peers, many of whom were quick to point out the deeply problematic nature of my
intention to research pedagogical initiatives intended to foster young adults’ formal political
participation, without questioning the merits of the system wherein youth would be obliged
to participate. My subsequent efforts to grapple with the contradictions raised by such
questioning ultimately led to two major insights:

1) That young adults who appear to be disengaged from formal politics are not in fact
apathetic, but alienated—and alienated in particular ways that are influenced by
race, gender, class, sexuality, dis/ability and other forms of difference.

2) That justice-oriented educators cannot coherently advocate young adults’
participation in formal politics uncritically or merely for its own sake.

Through this process, I have come to understand that to abstract liberal democracy from
capitalism – or individual non-voting youth from the system of governance within which
they exist as citizens – is to theorize as distinct those principles which are in fact mutually
constituted (Carpenter et al, 2013). It warrants reiterating, then, that citizens’ material
inequality does not merely ‘coexist’ with their legal equality in a liberal democratic context
such as Canada’s, but that the two actively form one another. Thus, “[f]ormal democracy,
with its ideology of freedom, equality, and classlessness, has become one of the most
effective mechanisms in sustaining and reproducing capitalist class relations” (Wood, 2006,
p. 11-12). Accepting this premise, this chapter therefore strives to interrogate young
progressives’ commitments to formal political engagement in liberal democratic contexts,
and asks what can help imbue diverse youth with a critical consciousness that allows them to
treat formal engagement as a tool for strategic use, rather than as the inherently commendable
practice it is routinely depicted to be. These efforts are admittedly imperfect and limited,
having comprised a late (and therefore only partially integrated) addition to my own
theoretical framework.

5.1 Criticality and the Classroom: “There’s an Uneasy Tension There”

Three of the aforementioned participants whose analyses of the limitations of formal
political participation in a liberal democratic context were relatively sophisticated were
Daphne, Lucas, and Jenn. Daphne is an elected member of the NDP’s federal caucus. Lucas
works for a not-for-profit organization that does non-partisan work related to civic
engagement and democracy promotion. Jenn, meanwhile, is an activist and organizer, whose
conventional political participation is characterized by her involvement in a major initiative
to educate voters on municipal politicians’ platforms. All three are markedly progressive—
variously committed to feminist organizing, labour organizing, indigenous activism, migrant
justice, and more. As well, they each had experience volunteering in election campaigns,
writing letters to elected officials, and the like. Among all my participants, they were
arguably uniquely aware of liberal, representative democracy’s profound and incorrigible
contradictions.

Lucas, for example, expressed a keen – and indeed uncomfortable – awareness of the alienating tendencies of liberal democracy, arguing that it involve “giving up your role in the world and in the lives of other people.” Despite her own indisputable commitment to the ‘system,’ insofar as she is an elected politician employed by a liberal democratic state, Daphne said she sees plenty of meaningful change happening outside that fundamentally flawed apparatus:

“There’s some angst that’s developing and I think a real sense of injustice. And the fact that the government has been … at best sort of neglectful, and at worst… encouraging trends that are making life more difficult… And so I think there’s a sense [that] the state doesn’t have our back… and there’s a parallel trend of social media being a space where sort of people communicate or are able to be heard and sort of create a sense of a movement which is incredible and in many ways can effect change… And so there’s a sense that something’s happening… and it has nothing to do with an election… or nothing to do with politicians.”

Jenn, meanwhile, applauded the efforts of people she referred to as ‘the revolutionaries,’ but also argued (with some exasperation) that young progressives should not be so quick to discard voting and other forms of conventional political participation:

“It’s great that young people are over here building their own new systems, or new ideas for systems… But what would also be great is if they could also understand that while doing that: cast your friggin’ vote too, you know! Like, it’s not going to take that long and it’s better that your voice be a part of that system too, while you’re over here doing this other stuff.”

Thus, these participants’ abilities to critique liberal democratic participation did not preclude them from treating normative forms of engagement as tools for selective use. As Daphne put it:

“I encourage people to become party members. I encourage people to vote… to get involved in party processes. I definitely encourage people to vote. But I don’t see it as like the absolute sign of civic engagement. I think it’s just part of the toolbox.”

With the possible exception of Lucas’s acknowledgement that voting involves alienating
one’s political power from oneself, even these relatively developed critiques arguably stopped short of identifying the essence of the contradictions representative government implies. By and large, Jenn, Daphne, Lucas, and their fellow participants were able to identify the appearance of these contradictions fairly readily—for example, that formal politics can seem frustratingly reproductive and unrepresentative. A description of the essence of those contradictions, however, proved substantially more elusive. Nevertheless, these three participants – and to varying degrees some others – did possess a notably critical analysis of liberal democracy, if not an altogether dialectical one. Lucas began to suggest a possible explanation for this nuanced position when asked about the role family members played in his own politicization:

“My mother was always super emphatic that I should just ask question after question after question… I remember I would often fall asleep with my mom and my dad and it would just be me asking questions, and questions, and questions… and them answering as much as they could until we both fell asleep or until I fell asleep. So that was like in me pretty deep… I would say that inquiry, in general, is my predisposition.”

This quote and others like it raised, for me, fundamental questions about the role of family in mitigating the effects of the various pedagogical interventions examined above. Indeed, Jenn echoed Lucas’s assertion of family as integral to the development of a critical, political analysis. Daphne, meanwhile, spoke at length about “how effective it is to develop a political analysis at home.” In fact, all three of these participants came from profoundly political households, with parents who worked in government (or in relation to it as members of the press and political scientists, for instance). Many of the participants who were less critical of liberal democracy, on the other hand, described their political engagement as uncharacteristic of their families, referring to themselves as ‘anomalies’ and ‘black sheep.’ Some went so far as to say that their family members seldom participate (conventionally or otherwise) in politics, and approach them for advice on the rare occasion that they even vote. Chantal, for
example, described the degree to which she differs dramatically from her family:

“My parents are both very unpolitical. I have siblings. They’re all very unpolitical. I don’t even think my dad or my sister vote. It’s interesting because my family’s all very business-oriented… They’re very much like a part of capitalist society which works for them, but it’s just not my thing.”

Despite capitalist society “not being her thing,” however, Chantal shared a basic acceptance of its mores with many of her fellow ‘black sheep’ (read: research participants from apolitical families), arguing that “[liberal democracy] is working for a large aggregate of people. So I’d rather retrofit it to work for more people than start with a blank slate.”

For her part, Emma was critical of liberal democracy without necessarily advocating its dismantlement and without actively envisioning strategies for pursuing social change apart from formal political participation. Here, she gives her rationale for conventional participation in the context of capitalist democracy:

“To engage in formal politics is not necessarily to disrupt the status quo. But I recognize that you need to work within those channels as well. Because those are the channels that are available to us. When I think about it, I’m like, Okay; if we have another four years of [Stephen] Harper, that’s going to have disastrous implications for a lot of indigenous people and for people who rely on social welfare. It’s going to be terrible for immigrants. It’s going to get worse for refugees. They’re going to keep building prisons and not deal with mental health as a public health issue, but as something to be criminalized. So I guess in that sense I’m a proponent of using formal political channels – even while buying into like Marxist or maybe more like Gramscian ideology – in that there’s really different implications if Harper’s elected versus Elizabeth May or Thomas Mulcair, you know?”

Emma is not wrong. Far from it. The lesser of evils is arguably better than the worst of these. Returning, momentarily, to Freire, we find confirmation of this from one of adult education’s most prolific and celebrated critical thinkers. Indeed in The Politics of Education, Freire writes that “[b]eing illiterate does not preclude the common sense to choose what is best for oneself, and to choose the best (or the least evil) leaders” (1985, p. 176). I receive this as evidence that Freire would have supported critical electoral engagement, even in the absence of a laudably progressive candidate. Emma’s testimony also reveals a kind of fatalism that
Freire would have eschewed, however. “Those are the channels that are available to us,” she declares, effectively negating the possibility that other more visionary, radical channels might also signify viable means of pursuing social change.

Overall, research participants’ varied reflections on social change in the context of liberal democracy pointed me to an important possibility: that criticality is acquired through a synchronicity of teaching and learning. That is to say, insofar as my research participants possessed capacities to critically question the role of liberal democracy in obscuring material inequalities, upholding capitalism, and promoting the alienation of people’s political power from themselves, it seemed to have been acquired largely through quotidian experiences and familial relationships outside school contexts. On the rare occasion that schooling itself was relevant to their development of a critical lens on liberal democratic citizenship, meanwhile, its influence was not typically achieved through the deliberate pedagogical intervention of a teacher, but through accidental encounters leading to unplanned disruptions and realizations. An example of this comes from Jenn’s description of attending a model UN conference in Europe, alongside other students from around the world:

“Oh Basically when we got to the conference I was so excited and I was expecting to meet people from all over the world... And then I got there and... like 80% of the people there were white. It was almost entirely attended by... like ambassadors’ children and stuff—rich, white students... So we had worked our butts off to prepare. And these were like rich schools where they didn’t. For us it was like a huge deal, we did tons of fundraisers to be able to like afford to go to this thing. And they had all maybe spent like an hour reading about the country that they were supposed to be presenting on... and I remember feeling really like, this is not right... The trip was still an amazing experience, but it was also disappointing. And it was disappointing for structural reasons [having to do with] class and race and all kinds of stuff... I don’t know the extent to which I would have understood it through that systemic kind of lens at the time, but there was definitely a sense of injustice.”

Here we can see how Jenn’s account of the significance of this conference to her political development focuses not on the planned pedagogical activities that were part of the excursion, but on her unplanned encounters with fellow participants.
Ultimately, the school’s ability to endow learners with an authentically dialectical analysis of liberal democracy seems therefore to be distinctly limited. Almost without exception, my research participants did assuredly become more active in politics – formally and otherwise – because of particular pedagogical experiences, in formal schooling contexts. However, these same experiences seem to have had little influence over the criticality of their engagement or even its political character. Indeed, similar accounts of politically empowering pedagogical experiences could conceivably have been relayed to me by a group of ten 18-34 year old Canadians steadfastly committed to the preservation of the status quo and utterly loyal to the Conservative party of Canada. Rather, participants’ leftist commitments to racial justice, class justice, marriage equality, indigenous sovereignty, gender equality, environmental protection, and more tended to stem from their encounters with family members, friends, and others in their communities. Their pedagogical experiences in formal schooling contexts, meanwhile, seemed instead to equip them to *act* upon these convictions.
6. Confronting Contradictions

When I first came to OISE/UT, I was enamoured with the vote. I berated friends and colleagues who failed to cast their ballots, and pridefully posted photos of myself outside the neighbourhood polling station to social media each election day. I participated in ‘get out the vote’ initiatives and fought for better coverage of abysmal voter turnout in my work as a journalist. Whereas I evidently remain committed to bolstering Canadians’ formal/electoral political participation (in particular that of progressive young adults), my commitment today is newly nuanced. Of course, I had always understood the inadequacies of voting on some level. I knew that Canada’s first past the post electoral system contributed to the formation of majority governments by parties that had received a minority of the popular vote. I knew that politicians were arguably more accountable to the whims of their party leadership and wealthy elites than to their constituents. And I was painfully aware of the seeming insignificance of a single ballot, cast once every four years (federally, at least). What I have learned since then is that voting – and other forms of formal political participation – can be worse than inadequate, imperfect, and flawed. They can (and do) actively contribute to the maintenance of a liberal democratic system that facilitates the abuses of capitalism and the ongoing reproduction of social inequalities from one generation to the next. These systems need to be disrupted, lest “[t]he outcomes of political struggle… remain within the social relations of capitalist production” (Carpenter, 2011, p. 50).

As well, I came to OISE/UT frustrated by my own educational experiences—dominated as they were by stagnant, transmissive, and depository paradigms for understanding teaching and learning… at times despite my teachers’ rhetorical commitments to constructing active learning environments. I knew from my own experience that such pedagogical frameworks were liable to engender passivity and compliance in learners,
whereas more authentically transformative (Miller, 2007) and emancipatory (Cranton, 2013) learning experiences had the capacity to foment participatory tendencies. I envisioned participation, however, to consist predominantly of those state-sanctioned forms of engagement so compellingly critiqued by many of the scholars mentioned herein. Unifying my evolving understanding of citizenship with my evolving conception of democratic learning, meanwhile, has led me to some challenging and at times contradictory insights. On the one hand, I continue to believe that there is tremendous value to identifying those pedagogies that have helped young adults participating in formal/electoral politics to develop these inclinations. In particular, my research confirms that exposure to pedagogical environments which promote debate and dialogue, the use of innovative and student-centred methods of assessment, candid classroom-based discussion of political topics, and more such ‘democratic’ pedagogical practices can help promote young people’s formal political engagement. As well, my data suggests that these experiences tend to occur in learning contexts which participants deem ‘intimate’ and describe as uncharacteristically small. Overall, participants’ testimony suggests that more widespread exposure to such pedagogies and such learning contexts may help ensure more representative levels of formal political participation by a generation of citizens that is demonstrably more committed than its predecessors to social justice (Levine et al, 2008; Madland & Logan, 2008; McGrane, 2015). Thus, pedagogies that promote formal political engagement may contribute to the propagation of a form of participation that – despite its seeming embrace of liberal democratic mores – is in fact radically averse to the status quo.

At the same time, however, this research journey has forced me to conclude that pedagogical experiences can all too easily be described as empowering without necessarily being meaningfully political. As discussed, a majority of those experiences my participants described as empowering did not effectively or necessarily convey what that same
empowerment was for. The answer to that question tended to come from elsewhere: namely, from family, from interactions with roommates and friends, or from unplanned experiences in schooling contexts, which occurred despite the pedagogical intentions of teachers. In accepting this, a principal limitation of this study becomes clear: that despite its preoccupation with the educational histories of progressive young adults, specifically, the research did not in fact determine what differentiates these diverse young people from their comparatively conservative counterparts. This is, perhaps, because these essential differences do not reside in educational experiences characterized by particular pedagogical interventions, but in quotidian experiences of learning about the world and about social change. An additional limitation of this research (and a possible area for future study) derives from the fact that participants often struggled to express the precise manner in which they were influenced by the types of pedagogical experiences referenced herein. They shared an unshakeable conviction that these experiences had mattered and had been different, but did not generally articulate the nature of a particular pedagogy’s influence with any real specificity. This will undoubtedly have been due in large part to my own failure to ask them to provide individual examples of the kinds of pedagogies they tended to describe in broad terms. As well, however, I suspect that this lack of precision is partly attributable an actual lack of precise moments of politicization through pedagogy. Much as I may have once hoped to discover that particular pedagogies lead, in neat succession, to particular kinds of political participation, I cannot reasonably conclude that such a linear model exists. Instead, it is clear that pedagogical experiences have had complicated, cumulative effects on my research participants which are mitigated in particular ways by their extra-school learnings and relationships—so that learners are politicized in ways that are informed by the totality of their social encounters.

John Dewey once famously asserted that “[d]emocracy has to be born anew every
generation and education is its midwife” (Dewey, 1916/1980, p. 139). I have always liked this quote. I still do. Insofar as democracy refers to the means by which we exist as a collective and make decisions about our communal lives, formal education undoubtedly plays a profound role in its formation and reformation. Earlier, I cited one of my research participants, Lucas describing school as a “healthy escalation” of one’s social reality. In this sense, its role in helping young people – progressive or otherwise – become formally political is undoubtedly essential. The accounts of my research participants confirm, time and time again, that pedagogical experiences played crucial roles in building the kind of confidence required to run for office, canvass in elections, occupy positions of leadership within political parties, and work in civic engagement promotion. My research also suggests, however, that we ought perhaps to think more holistically about how democracy is birthed. Education, it seems, cannot by itself bring into being forms of political participation which are critically conscious and express a dialectical understanding of liberal democracy and its limitations. Much like formal political participation, itself, education is perhaps better understood as a small part of the equation. Deeply significant opportunities for capacity-building undoubtedly reside in the pedagogical interventions which can occur in formal schooling contexts. Capacity alone is not enough, however. Returning, one last time, to Paula Allman, we are reminded that praxis constitutes a unity of thought and action—so that the political actions our capacities enable us to take are constantly formed by our theories of social relations and social change, just as these theories are formed by our experiences of acting politically. The development of sophisticated theories of social change and critiques of liberal democracy, meanwhile, remains an elusive outcome of pedagogical intervention, but one that is nevertheless utterly worth pursuing.
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