

OPINION

The virus of disinformation threatens democracy and education is the cure

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The attack on the U.S. Capitol building was shocking but not a surprise to those studying extremism in the United States and Canada, where support for democracy has been plummeting.

In 1995, just 1-in-16 Canadians agreed with the idea that it would be “good” or “very good” for the military to run the country rather than elected democratic officials. Today, 1-in-5 agree.

Nearly 1-in-4 Americans and 1-in-5 Canadians think democracy is a bad way to run the country and would like to live under a political system in which a strong leader could make decisions without being bothered with elections or interference from Parliament. But as someone who studies the role of schools in democratic societies, what keeps me up at night is the fact that almost half of millennials share that view.

Democracy, it seems, is not self-winding.

Public schools in Canada were founded on the idea that democracy could not work if citizens were not taught the principles and habits of democratic life. But in the same period that support for democracy has declined, that founding purpose of schooling has shifted — you could say that it was hijacked — by the standards and accountability movements of the last two decades.

Most school districts now emphasize preparing students for standardized assessments in math and literacy at the same time that they shortchange the social studies, history, and even the most basic forms of citizenship education.

The obsession with standardized testing in only two subject areas and the relentless pressure on schools to cover more and more material

means lessons that develop the attitudes, skills, knowledge, and habits necessary for a democratic society to flourish are crowded out.

Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg calls this kind of school reform GERM (for Global Education Reform Movement). It's like an epidemic, he says, that "spreads and infects education systems through a virus. It travels with pundits, media and politicians. Education systems borrow policies from others and get infected. As a consequence, schools get ill, teachers don't feel well, and kids learn less."

When the testing tail wags the school reform dog, democracy loses. Why would we expect adults, even senators or members of Parliament, to be able to intelligently and compassionately discuss different viewpoints in the best interests of their constituents if schoolchildren never, or rarely, get that opportunity in school? When policy-makers focus obsessively on learning metrics, teachers are forced to reduce their teaching to endless lists of facts and skills, unmoored from their social meaning.

Like most educators, I have nothing against facts. But, democratic societies require more than citizens who are fact-full. They require citizens who can think and act in ethically thoughtful ways.

A well-functioning democracy needs schools that teach students to recognize ambiguity and conflict in factual content, to see human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and to embrace debate and deliberation as a cornerstone of democratic societies.

More than 100 years ago, the philosopher John Dewey wrote that democracy must "be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife."

We will all be glad when the global COVID-19 pandemic is brought under control. But there is another virus that threatens Canada that is fed by a toxic combination of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Luckily, the vaccine is already available: education. But public schools need to be allowed and encouraged to reclaim their democratic mission. We can no longer take democracy for granted.