This is What Democracy Looks Like: Some Thoughts on Democratic Schools

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INTRODUCTION

I was really glad to hear that *Middle Grades Review* was gearing up for an issue on democracy in schools. There was a time when quite a bit of writing was done on that topic, from classroom accounts to general education theory; but, in recent years, interest in democratic schools seems to have faded. This is not surprising since ascendant conservative politics has sought to replace democracy everywhere with authoritarian populism. The place I hear the term most consistently used these days is signs and chants at protest events proclaiming, "This is what democracy looks like!" I like that idea for a protest theme, but I have also found myself thinking, "It is? Is this what democracy looks like?"

The "democracy" I imagine is a public democracy, committed to human dignity, a common good, social justice, and equity. It is also committed to creative individuality in which people have the right to think for themselves, to be fully informed about the important issues of the day, to hold beliefs of their own choosing, to have a say in what and how things are done, to pursue personal aspirations and growth, to be free from oppression, and to experience just and equitable treatment. And, too, it is committed to social responsibility by which people understand their obligation to collaborate in resolving community problems, to seek accurate information about social and political topics, to promote justice and equity, and to act in ways that generally enhance the quality of social, political, and economic life of the larger society. This definition is different from what often passes for democracy in contemporary use. It is not a "naïve" democracy that presumes democracy is only a process, that voting in elections, for example is all that is required to secure the common good. Nor is it a "private" or "self-interested" democracy defined by the often-heard phrase, "I can do whatever I want . . . this is a democracy." And it is certainly not the "vulgar" democracy defined as consumers having lots of choices in a free market. Those uses of the term not only diminish the moral dimensions of democracy but are frequently used to avoid them.

To create, maintain, or renew the kind of democracy I am thinking of would require that people aspire to a number of skills and related predispositions. For example, we would need to know how to use our voices in identifying issues, to work together in constructive ways, to make plans for resolving social problems, to think reflectively and critically, to gather accurate information from a variety of sources, to communicate ideas and findings, and more. We would also need to respect the ideas and opinions of others, be able to work across cultures, understand how their own fate is tied up in the fate of others, care about equity, and believe that people are capable for collectively resolving the problems and issues society faces.

Since we are not born hardwired with these values and skills we must have opportunities to learn them. While each of us has many influences in our lives, the one place almost all of us share in common is schools. So, it is here that society has the best chance to promote democratic values and skills among young people so that they might learn the democratic way of life. The only way this can happen is if the people who work in and around schools intentionally try to make them democratic places.

Imagining a Democratic School

I have come to think of this process as having two dimensions. One is the principles of democracy and the associated skills and values they suggest. The other is the idea that there may be many ways of bringing those overriding principles to life in a school or classroom. Over the long history of theory and practice around democratic schools, certain broadly defined

practices have emerged to suggest some general ideas of what we could expect to see within them in varying forms.

At the whole-school level, for example, we might expect to find a democratic culture built around arrangements like the following.

- Policies and procedures created and carried out so as to maintain the dignity of adults and young people at all times.
- Teacher placements, schedules, resources, and the like arranged so as to give all students access to the most highly qualified teachers, the best practices, and the most important outcomes available in the school.
- Recognition of diversity among students and staff celebrated as an asset rather than considered as a problem.
- Policy making groups such as leadership teams with broad representation from constituencies within the school and from the larger community.
- Collaborative problem-solving around school issues would be done by students and adults together through action research groups, issue centered committees, and the like.
- Professional development organized around questions and concerns rising out of classrooms and primarily led by teachers themselves.
- Emphasis placed on bringing students together in heterogeneous rather than homogenous groups, elimination of tracking, and inclusion of students with disabilities.
- Formal structures for conflict resolution such as restorative circles used whenever possible.

The general education program meant for all students would include specific versions of arrangements and practices that are associated with democratic life.

- The curriculum would include space for units exploring issues and concerns of young people themselves as well those found in the larger world. In this way students might broaden and deepen their understanding of themselves and their world, as well as see how their own present and future self-interests are tied to the fate of the common good.
- The curriculum would be collaboratively planned by students and teachers as often as possible. Since having a voice and having it count for something is a hallmark of democracy, participation in identifying possible themes and activities, selecting resources, assessing work, and so on is crucial to the concept of a democratic curriculum.
- Problems and issues, along with related projects and other activities, would serve as the context for teaching and learning content and skills, just as they do in democratic life, rather than in abstract or disconnected subject areas.
- Knowledge from disciplines would be integrated as it is brought to bear on problems and issues and, if necessary, taught directly in the context of the issue being explored. Day-to-day schedules and activities would be organized around whatever projects or problems students are working on within a theme.
- Work on problems and issues would examine the values questions they raise. Exploration of environmental or economic issues, for example, would include related matters of social justice. These opportunities to reflect on personal and social values are crucial if we expect young people to integrate democratic values into actual behavior.
- As problems and issues are drawn from contemporary life, knowledge and experience from sources beyond the disciplines of knowledge would be integrated into the curriculum. These would include cultural histories, popular culture, and students' personal knowledge. Content from all sources would be open to critical examination.
- To be consistent with life and learning in the larger world, a premium would be placed on collaboration and interaction with space for collective and individual action. All students in a class or on a team would take on the same problem or issue while differentiation would be offered as they work on different kinds of projects or tasks within the common theme.
- As much as possible, assessment would be based on students' individual and group reflection about their work and growth. Learning would be demonstrated through authentic

activities like portfolios, project exhibitions, and community action.
- Teachers would be active participants and informed participants, responsible for listening carefully to young people, suggesting directions for their ideas, bringing a broader perspective to issues, creating projects and other activities, teaching needed content and skills, and offering feedback about individual and group work.

Many specific curriculum and policy revisions we have seen over the past few decades offer excellent examples of democratic efforts. For example, revisions around race, class, and gender equity are enormous steps toward democratic schools as they more fully and fairly treat non-dominant and marginalized cultures and groups. So, too, are the various efforts to include some student voice in school policy. In my view, though, we must sooner or later come to question the very form of the dominant curriculum. The discipline-based separate subject organization that derives from the high-culture world of academics is alienating and exclusionary to many students, particularly those from non-privileged backgrounds. And for even more students it is so remote from everyday life as to be inaccessible. Simply offering access to this kind of curriculum or mediating it with clever motivational tricks is not enough when its very form hinders equal access to school outcomes for many. Thus, if we really mean to bring democracy to life in schools, we will need to take seriously the whole collection of general practices listed above.

Dilemmas and Quandaries in Democratic Schooling

If the case for democratic schools can so readily be made, as it has for more than a century, why are such schools so hard to find? Certainly one answer at present is that democracy in all social institutions is under duress around the world with the rise of authoritarian populism. But even at times when politicians and policy makers were more friendly toward democracy, democratic schools were not all that common. Given that fact, we are also forced to look inside the schools for some answers.

Some of the inside resistance to democratic schools is fairly easy to name. For example, schools are generally set up to sort and select students for various kinds of self-interested advancements, like college admission and career preparation. The fierce competition this involves is supported by people inside the school as well as parents, business leaders, and others on the outside. Ideas like equity and inclusion are seen as threats to privileged social and economic groups who have traditionally dominated academic rankings. In this way, there is often a lot of local pressure on schools not to use democratic practices that promote equitable outcomes. Indeed, if communities-at-large sincerely meant to promote democracy in schools, there would not be so many examples of segregated neighborhood schools, inequitable funding, and loopholes that allow privileged families to distance themselves from people who are poor and of color.

Another point of resistance is that democracy tends to be fairly messy. Things like participatory decision-making and collaborative problem-solving take time and often seem tedious. For those who like order and convenience in school matters, democracy does not seem like a good choice for a governing philosophy. Finally, almost everything about education these days seems to be judged in terms of individual earning power and labor market needs, from the value of particular subjects to the ranking of schools by student test scores. In this environment there is practically no chance whatsoever that we might see something like “intentional use of democratic practices” among the ranking criteria.

In my experience, democratic practices are much more likely to be found in individual classrooms or teaching teams than across whole schools. This means that such practices may be difficult, but not impossible in a school setting. Why, then, do not more teachers find ways to use democratic practices where possible in the classroom spaces over which they do have some control? Likewise, why do not more school administrators promote and support democratic practices in their schools? It is hard to believe that they have never heard of democratic schools and classrooms since the idea is almost always included in the rhetoric of teacher education programs.

For some, no doubt, avoiding democratic practices has to do with fear of losing control. Though one would think they would eventually figure out that constantly fighting with young people who resent autocratic control takes a lot

more effort than when students believe they have a reasonable and legitimate say in what happens in their classrooms and schools. Other educators may sense that democracy is just plain harder work though again, what could be more difficult than trying to figure out how to manage a group of disenfranchised young people who see little value in what the school offers them?

Beyond those reasons, though, is something that has been troubling me for a long time – and that is the possibility that some educators really do believe that young people are not entitled to democratic experiences in schools and so intentionally avoid democratic practices. More than once I have actually heard professionally licensed educators say things like, "This is not a democracy, it's *my* classroom" or "I'm the principal, *I* make the decisions around here." If they mean what they say, it must be possible to make a case against schools as democratic places. What kind of reasoning could they possibly use?

If I am that teacher, I would have to believe that though our society in general is supposed to be a democracy, my classroom is somehow exempt from that expectation. The values and practices of the democratic way of life stop at my classroom door and do not extend to young people. For example, I have no moral obligation to uphold the dignity of my students or treat them in an equitable manner, nor am I obliged to give them a say in making decisions in my classroom. I have no obligation to arrange collaborative problem-solving experiences and, in fact, I have every right to encourage self-interest and competitive activities. Moreover, my students should accept what I tell them about my subject or the world in general, as well as what is in the resources I tell them to use. They should not expect to question me or those resources. Finally, my students should accept my judgment as to the value of their work. They should not expect to have any say or skill in judging their own work or what goes on in my classroom.

If I am that principal, I would have to believe that the teachers in the school are simply employees rather than professional educators and should not expect to be treated otherwise. I should have a right to make all executive decisions about policies and practices in the school and they should not expect to have a say. I should have a right to assign teachers to any space, place, or team in the school and they should not expect to be part of those decisions. I should have a right to evaluate teachers whenever I like and using whatever criteria I define.

I really do not want to believe that such reasoning is possible by professional educators in a democratic society. But how else to explain phrases like "*my* classroom" and "*my* school" and the behaviors that follow from them. Imagining the possible reasoning involved may seem like a harsh exercise, especially at a time when so much disrespect is being thrown at educators by so many people outside schools. But I have arrived at this point out of frustration as the stakes for democracy have become higher and higher.

External criticism and personal teaching "styles" cannot forever be enough to excuse us from trying to create democratic schools. If we supposedly live in a democratic society, then the values and practices associated with the democratic way of life should be evident across our social institutions. I believe that now, in the midst of authoritarian populism and increasing social and economic stratification, educators are obligated more than ever to try to bring those values and practices to life in the school. Again, this is the one place where we bring together virtually all young people and thus the one and best place to promote the democratic way of life. If we, as educators, do not feel obligated in this way then we are simply leaving democracy to chance.

The Case for the Middle Grades

In considering the possibilities for democratic practices in the middle grades, advocates should remember at least three factors in support of their efforts. First, while many parents and school officials expect the middle grades to simply offer junior versions of the subject-centered, highly stratified high school, many others do recognize that young adolescents are not necessarily ready for that kind of approach (as if most high school students are either). Thus, middle grades educators may well have more opportunities than they think to make room for the kind of curriculum described above. It is also the case that many parents did not exactly have positive experiences themselves in the middle grades and are pleased when they find their children experiencing equity and dignity through democratic structures. And what could be better than having your child answer

the question, “What did you do in school today?” with a project description rather than the usual “nothing.”

The second favorable factor is that many middle schools are still organized around some kind of teaming. This means that teachers can more easily carry out projects and other activities in a larger block of time, collaboratively plan for integrating subject area knowledge, take on multiple roles in relation to projects, and plan with multiple perspectives. In addition, the idea of a democratic community can operate on a scale larger than in a single classroom. Finally, and importantly, teaming offers an opportunity for teachers inclined toward democratic practices to create a place where they can work with like-minded colleagues in a school where the rest of the staff balks at such practices.

The third advantage has to do with young adolescents themselves. Anyone who has spent any time with them is sure to know that they are famous for reacting to one or another situation, large or small, with an indignant, “That’s not fair!” And they are usually ready to offer a long list of reasons to defend their position. Annoying as these episodes may sometimes be, they are nevertheless a demonstration that young adolescents are ready, willing, and able to take on questions of values, from those in everyday events to matters of social and economic justice. This kind of clue should encourage middle grades educators to find more space for the kind of democratic pedagogy described earlier. And if we believe that young adolescents are too immature to take on serious social issues, that they are merely “hormones with feet,” we are turning a blind eye to the fact that more and more of them confront those issues every day. In the end, it is not a question of whether they are ready to take on big issues but of whether we are interested in helping them do so. If only more teachers and administrators would do that, we could be back on the path toward democratic schools in the middle grades. We might even reach a point where we could say, “This is what democracy looks like!”

Author’s note: I have purposely chosen not to include references in the text as I was only trying to express some ideas that occur to me now after 50 years thinking about democratic schools. If I had used references, I am certain that among others I would have cited the following repeatedly: John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* and *Experience and Education*, Gertrude Noar’s *Teaching and Learning the Democratic Way*, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Rosalind Zapf’s *Democratic Processes in the Secondary School*, Roland Faunce and Nelson Bossing’s *Developing the Core Curriculum*, the collection of school and classroom stories Michael Apple and I edited in *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education*, and, selfishly, my own book, *A Reason to Teach*. At the middle level specifically, I would have had to include sources like Mark Springer’s *Soundings*, Barbara Brodhagen’s essay in the *Democratic Schools* book previously cited, and many of the other classroom accounts of democratic education that have appeared over the years. And, of course, that list would have included the number of papers that have appeared on the topic more recently in places like *Middle Grades Review*.