

Rediscovering Democratic Values in Education

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Abstract

The practice of teaching democracy and democratic values in school is diminishing. Becoming an engaged democratic citizen begins by practicing democracy in the classroom. It is in this first community that students should learn to exercise voice; to make choices and take responsibility for their own learning; and to understand, give, and receive fair, equitable and respectful treatment. Dewey, who is acknowledged as the Father of American Education, was influential in progressive theories of education and an advocate for teaching democracy. One of the most important way to make the education system and school environment more democratic is to decentralize the process of school governance and to engage more people in decision-making. In the everyday life of the classroom, students should experience democracy at every opportunity, and should cultivate an appreciation of the democratic process. A teacher being fair to all students in the classroom is very important for the students. Teachers need to bring democracy back to the classroom by setting up democratic classrooms. Teachers have to believe in democracy as an institution and recognize that democracy is possible and worthwhile teaching.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Democratic Values, Democratic School Environment

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to bring awareness to the importance of practicing democracy and to identify ways in which teachers can set up a democratic classroom in today's world. As newly formed democratic societies attempt to rebuild their countries politically, economically, and socially, and to extend to their citizens the rights and freedoms they deserve, one thing is apparent: their long-term success will depend in large measure on how quickly and deeply the principles and institutions of democracy take root in the hearts and minds of their citizens. If the ideals that fueled the popular struggles against oppression are to be realized and remain secure over time, people must come to understand and appreciate what democracy is, what life in a free society means, and what institutional arrangements and personal behaviors are necessary for such a society to endure and prosper. They must develop the habits, attitudes, and values that make democracy possible, and the commitment and enthusiasm necessary to nurture and sustain it. Only if each generation comes to understand and appreciate democracy will this form of governance prove to be stable and successful.

Democracy

The word "democracy" has its origins in the Greek language. It combines two shorter words: "demos" meaning whole citizen living within a particular city-state and "kratos" meaning power or rule. However, both terms have more than one meaning (Arblaster, 1996). Writers such as Aristotle accept the definition of democracy as being ruled by the people or the many, including the poor. This was not necessarily the case in Ancient Greece, where the only participants were adult males who were eligible to serve

in the defence forces. So a democratic state is one where government is legitimised by the agreement of those subject to its rule, agreement being determined through the election process. Elections are therefore the essence of democracy, referring to the procedural basis of the concept. Calabrese and Barton (1994) argue that one of the primary lessons of a democracy is that we can agree to disagree. We can debate all sides of an issue until common ground is found.

As it implies freedom of choice, equity and justice and no trial or other practice outside education it has the power to promote these fundamental values. Democracy can be established and strengthened only when shared by all members of society, share ways of thinking and behavior, political culture and democratic values. John Dewey, Ivan Illich, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and many others have all critiqued the authoritative, essentially anti-democratic mode of education that has become a pervasive mainstay of the modern educational system. Democracy gives to ordinary citizens the greatest opportunity of influencing public decisions. Debate must be anticipated and encouraged. Students, too, must be taught to act democratically so as to promote democracy as a process.

Democratic Values

Kincal and Isik (2003) numerated the democratic values as equality, respect life, justice, freedom, honesty, the search for goodness, cooperation, self-esteem, tolerance, sensibility, responsibility, acceptance of difference, safety, peace, development, perfection, and effectiveness.

Values serve as guiding principles for the approaches and goals that should be promoted in practicing democracy. Garrison (2003) makes the case that not only is education important to democracy, but that the values of democracy, for example, freedom and self-governance, are essential to the process of learning. He stresses that it is the practice of these values in the classroom that makes a rich learning environment possible and evolves the approach to curriculum. The basic values of democracy are equality, freedom, and justice (Beane, 2005; Goodlad, 2000; Kesici, 2008; Shechtman, 2002). These values are manifested in a democratic classroom (Shechtman, 2002), and in order to build a democratic classroom, teachers should promote them (Kesici, 2008).

Kesici (2008) also suggests that teachers who want to practice democracy should demonstrate their beliefs by giving importance to democratic values in their classrooms. He feels that a democratic teacher should hold democratic values in high esteem and adopt appropriate teaching methods in accordance with those values. The more a teacher understands democracy and incorporates it in the classroom the more it will be understood by students (Knight, 2001).

Democratic School Environment

A democratic school environment is one in which teachers and students, along with school administrators, engage in open and shared decision-making processes in the teaching-learning enterprise where differences are minimized. At best, school life should seek to foster tolerance, right to participation, empowerment and respect for human dignity and individual views.

Various theories of management suggest that a democratic environment in a school context not only benefits the academic and socialization experiences of students, but also affects the work productivity and well-being of teachers. Dewey argued that in a democratic school the students would share in the determination of their own learning

environment and learning content and process. Many contemporary writers advocate a democratic voice for students and teachers in school management (Apple 1988; Carnoy and Levin 1985; Darling-Hammond 1996; Giroux 1988; Goodlad 1996; Sarason 1996; Soder 1996; Tedford 1996). To the extent that this aspect of the democratic school is implemented, then the professional and autonomous role of the teacher is radically changed from its traditional form.

Dewey, who is acknowledged as the Father of American Education, was influential in progressive theories of education and an advocate for teaching democracy. His philosophy of education was closely aligned with his belief in democracy. In his advocacy for teaching democracy, Dewey argued it is not possible for democracy to be taught or understood in institutions (such as schools) that are undemocratic (Mosher, Kenny & Garrod, 1994). He believed in child or student-centered learning as opposed to teacher-centered lecturing. The approach of child-centered learning was based on the work of Dewey, as well as that of the constructivist theory of Piaget and others, which held that children learn by building on their own learning experiences and by their reflections of those experiences. Dewey's (1915) progressive education ideas were in contrast to what had been the traditional method of teaching, that is, authoritarian and focused on delivering knowledge. These ideas were demonstrated in several of his books such as *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915) and *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916). The themes of these books emphasized ideas such as the educational importance of practicing democracy in the schools, of nurturing communication, of promoting student-centered learning based on experience, or constructivism, of developing community, and of implementing an approach to teaching in which information is not teacher-delivered but based rather on a more equitable teacher-student relationship involving inquiry.

Extracurricular Activities

Schools may provide a forum for democratic activities and learning outside the classroom. Extracurricular activities such as athletic teams, clubs, and youth groups give students opportunities to work together toward a common goal, and often require them to select leaders and make important decisions. Students interested in theater, dance, photography, computers, and other hobbies may organize clubs for these activities, where democratic norms can be put into practice. Particularly effective at imparting democratic knowledge and skills are debate clubs, which encourage students to take an active interest in public affairs, express their opinions, and respect the views of others. Student newspapers are also an effective and popular way to involve students in important societal issues while educating them about the role of the media.

One of the most important way to make the education system and school environment more democratic is to decentralize the process of school governance and to engage more people in decision-making. Schools may form administrator-teacher committees to make decisions on such issues as class scheduling, student testing, and classroom discipline. Parent-teacher associations may make recommendations on curriculum or school budgets. And broader governing bodies, perhaps including administrators, teachers, and parents, may oversee these and other important issues. In each case, elections can be held to determine who will serve, and meetings and forums may be called to engage a wider constituency in the issues under consideration. One study by Kesici (2008) was based on a survey of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers

in Turkey to ascertain their views on themes of democratic values, teacher duties, fair behaviors, personal freedom and equality of opportunity.

In a democratic classroom, students feel the sense of ownership that comes with being a stakeholder. Shifting from teacher-centered to student-centered learning requires students to think and participate more and to take control of their learning (Vega & Tayler, 2005). It is also clear that educators who believe in democratic values must take the leadership role in promoting those values, facilitating active learning, meeting the needs of the students, using appropriate teaching methods, and creating an optimal learning environment

Teaching Democracy

Teaching democracy lends itself well to such creativity and excitement. There is no right way to teach democracy unless we practise it. In order to teach democracy teachers must model democracy. Secondly, students and teachers must be free to experience democracy, to learn to function in it and to grow and change through the experience. The practice of teaching democracy and democratic values in school is diminishing. Becoming an engaged democratic citizen begins by practicing democracy in the classroom. It is in this first community that students should learn to exercise voice; to make choices and take responsibility for their own learning; and to understand, give, and receive fair, equitable and respectful treatment. It is in this environment that they should feel safe to express ideas, explore leadership, and to participate in guiding the classroom community. In order to be able to build a democratic classroom, the teacher should apply freedom, equality, and justice--the main values of democracy--in the classroom. In a democratic classroom, freedom underlies democracy. And, the ranges of personal freedom include respecting a person's life, protection, fair trial, privacy, freedom of speech, religious freedom, and freedom to marry and set up a family (Aktan & Vural, 2003).

It is important to remember that ideas don't become knowledge except by being embodied in practice and in consequent transformations of the self. The basic concepts of democracy must be taught, providing children with the knowledge base and theories underpinning democracy and the democratic state. Students can read textbooks, monographs, biographies, autobiographies, heroic tales, poetry, and other works discussing and illuminating aspects of democracy. They may study primary documents, such as democratic charters and constitutions. They may put on plays or skits dealing with important issues or events. They may even play games, solve puzzles, and hold contests.

Education for democracy can be approached in a manner appropriate to students at the elementary, secondary, or post-secondary levels. Whatever the age of the student, pedagogy is naturally most effective when it captures his or her imagination effectively. One useful way to inform students about their government and the democratic political system is to invite government officials, analysts, and critics to visit the classroom and answer students questions. This will not only teach children how government works, but it will also help them to bring it to life. Another way to make democracy vivid is by incorporating it into everyday classroom activities. Give the students some say in matters affecting the class. Letting them vote on certain issues. Allow them to work in teams, teach other children, allocate resources, make presentations, and lead class discussions.

All these activities require skills vital to democratic life, skills that are often best learned through experience rather than didactically.

Teaching for democracy is teaching about an inclusive society. This society recognises all members, regardless of race, religion, gender, status, socio-economic status and skin colour. An inclusive community recognizes diversity among its members and makes people feel that they are part of the community. Teaching democracy in the classroom means incorporating the values of democracy, using a democratic approach to teaching that enables students to practice democracy, and providing a safe environment where students can take risks and where they can actively participate in the learning process. Without a population educated in democracy and citizenship, our country faces the prospect of losing our hard-won democracy. We are losing sight of our democratic values and responsibilities, and this trend will continue if new generations are not taught these values and not given the chance to practice them in school.

Role of a Teacher

One of the duties of teachers, who build a democratic classroom, is to create a positive education process for the students. Such an education process closely depends on an effective relationship constructed between the teacher and the students. In order to construct an effective relationship in the classroom, teachers should create a cooperative learning environment, respect the students, and motivate the students to achieve sufficiency in their social relations. Another duty of teachers, while building a democratic environment, is planning the class objectives with their students. Teachers should respect students' beliefs and values, and also the students should respect one another's beliefs and values. Teachers should increase students' cognitive and perceptive awareness levels by teaching them democratic values (Henderson, 2001). Seals (2006) states that making students feel they are valuable and supporting their autonomy is among the duties of a democratic teacher.

Teachers may also encourage democratic behavior through their classroom techniques as well. Lecturing to a class is not always the best way to reach students. Students should be involved in discussions and encouraged to ask questions. Questioning is the beginning of wisdom. If they cannot seem to come up with any questions or comments, the teacher must ask questions and stimulate discussion. This is one of the most difficult things for students--and teachers--in newly free societies to get used to, but it is an essential element of democracy education.

Meeting the needs of the students is among the duties of a democratic teacher, as well. Glasser (1996) indicates these needs as belonging, power, freedom, and fun. If these needs are met by the teachers, students not only will be successful but also they will gain internal motivation (Erwin, 2003; Hardin, 2004).

Although a totally inclusive society may never be realised, educators should be modelling these ideals and attempting to eradicate sexism, racism and other components of a harmful, non-productive and uncaring, prejudiced society. The basic human value that must be promoted in a democracy is respect for human dignity. Educating for democracy provides opportunities for children to learn about other cultures and ways of seeing and celebrating our commonalities and differences. Primary children need to be taught to consider issues and debate alternatives in order to appreciate and practise the basic concepts of democracy. Of course, teachers should never accept rudeness or insolence from students, but they should promote curiosity, discussion and critical

thinking skills. Students learn in ways that are more enduring and applicable to life when they become stakeholders in the process.

Children need to understand that there are differing viewpoints, solutions or perspectives in addition to their own. The skill of listening to others and accepting and respecting their points of view are valuable lessons taught in a classroom that values democracy. In the end, the processes and discussions are just as important as the result, as people have the opportunity to discuss and debate issues. A decision or viewpoint has not been made without explanation or clarification of concepts. It is not the aim of a democracy to convert people to one view but rather to seek common ground, to seek better understanding, to seek to discover how we can improve our society all altogether.

In the everyday life of the classroom, students should experience democracy at every opportunity, and should cultivate an appreciation of the democratic process. We need to allow democracy to fully operate with all its components so that the spheres of freedom mentioned above can continue and expand, and, thus, allow individuals to enjoy equality and have faith in the equal opportunities offered them. A teacher who cares about equality in the classroom gives equal opportunity of education to each student, and in doing so, the teacher meets each student's education needs. Therefore, a democratic teacher gives equal opportunity to students in order all students can be successful. However, some students may need more help than others, special help; this special help should not mean inequality. This means that in order for all students to be successful, the needs of the students should be met, since equality does not mean treating all students in the same way. Equality means to meet the needs of all students(Gathercoal,2001).

A teacher being fair to all students in the classroom is very important for the students. While establishing classroom rules, the teacher should encourage the students to participate in establishing the classroom rules as part of their fights. In addition, the teacher should apply those rules formed with the students to all students fairly. In the case of misbehavior, the teacher should not make a decision without listening to the explanation of the student first, then the teacher should make a decision accordingly. Listening to the student and then giving a decision accordingly is a result of showing respect toward the student (Landau & Gathercoal, 2000).

The teacher is the key factor in the process of building a democratic classroom, because the teacher is the one organizing the relationships in the classroom, setting rules, and preparing educational and learning activities. Teachers should demonstrate respect for children by calling them appropriate names, respecting their opinions and expecting civility and politeness to one another

Teaching the skills, processes and values of democracy to children involves the serious process of reflecting upon how we want to live as a society. Teachers should build classrooms where students' needs are met, and their rights are guaranteed in a safe and active learning environment. Such a place is surely a democratic classroom (Raywid, 1987). There are many variables affecting the process of building a democratic classroom, since a democratic classroom is built by teachers, who attach importance to democratic values and display these values in their classrooms daily. During the process of building a democratic classroom that may take a long time, the teachers should be in cooperation with the students. In their classrooms, these teachers especially should give students the opportunity to use their constitutional rights, treat all students equally, and apply classroom rules fairly to all students. For these reasons, the purpose of this study is

to examine how to build a democratic environment, to determine the democratic values of a democratic teacher, and to decide how a democratic teacher provides the students with the main democratic values--freedom, equality, and justice--in a classroom application, according to teachers' views.

Conclusion

For democracy to continue to thrive, children must be taught to value it as a way of life. The necessary skills for building democracy do not develop automatically in children. Teaching democracy means preparing children to become citizens who will preserve and shape democracy in the future. Therefore democracy should be a key aspect in every form of education at the earliest age possible. The practice of democracy, one of the cornerstones of our society, is being pushed out of its rightful place in the classroom. Teachers need to bring democracy back to the classroom by setting up democratic classrooms. Some teachers are even required to teach scripted curriculum. As a result of this approach, teachers have no time left to teach other concepts or to enhance learning. Democracy depends, for its existence, on actively involved members who have a commitment to individual freedom and to the rights and responsibilities of participating in a democracy.

Children should prepare and become part of the decision making process, an area often deemed unsuitable for children in the past. Teachers and parents need to understand and accept the value that such responsibilities have for children. Children should be given the right to participate and also accept responsibility and deal with the consequences of their decisions. Children must be taught to take responsibility for their actions. Participation in this process will reinforce the importance of informed decision making. Teachers have the important role of preparing their students for the task and ensuring that they have the necessary background briefing, understandings and maturity to contribute.

Amy Gutman (1987) agrees that curriculum documents alone cannot take total responsibility for citizenship. A school's ethos, its structures and its role models also clearly articulate to students about what is important and valued. Tolerance, respect, a willingness to learn from one another these are the values on which democratic nations thrive. They are the values which schools must teach and practise. Democratic principles must permeate the curriculum and be evident in relations in the school and community. Teachers have to believe in democracy as an institution and recognise that democracy is possible and worthwhile teaching. A democratic society is more than a democratically elected government and a system of national institutions. Strong and independent local authorities, a developed and active civil society at national and local levels, and a democratic ethos in workplaces and schools are also key manifestations of the democratic society. Democracy is a practical process that should be nurtured every day and everywhere.

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