



Democratic Schools – the educational answer to the 21st century

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What are the reasons for the main crises that the education system is facing? **Why** are the solutions of more... of what has failed... will continue to fail? **What** are the new solutions that the democratic education offers? **And** why now is the time?

Where did the Japanese discipline go? \ From “Ha’aretz” newspaper, 5.2.99

Teacher Sato’s second grade is falling apart. One of the children has already broken the windows four times. Another child is hitting his friends and spitting on the floor. Another child is writing on the walls. The rest of the pupils don’t clean after them, refuse to listen to the teacher’s orders and chat constantly during class. Discipline – not in our school.

In the last few years many of the Japanese classes turned from straight rows of obedient pupils to chaotic circuses of problematic youngsters. Teachers, who got used to the stature of “sansay” – the distinguished master that no one dares to defy – find themselves incapable of dealing with the student’s growing impudence. “The Washington Post” brought the story of the new phenomena.

“Broken classes”, is the name given to the Japanese classes, in which the studies are stopped due to student’s disturbance in the radio and television – and in every public park in which the mothers gather to discuss. A survey recently conducted by a Japanese news agency shows that 44% of the teachers in elementary and junior high schools taught in “broken classes”. Most schools continue, of course, to function as usual. But the change in the teachers’ stature takes its toll: some of them say they lost their authority, others say they are close to a nervous brake down.

All of Japan is trying to understand the causes for the situation that the educational system got into. Some blame the ministry of education that refused, so they claim, to adjust its methods, which require

homogeneity, to the world of pupils who are getting to be more and more individualistic.

Some claim that the roots of the problem lie in the children’s eating too much fast food and spending too much time in front of the television and the computer’ screen. And some say, that the Japanese children are simply imitating the American children.

Upon one thing almost everyone agrees: the Japanese society is going through a fundamental change. The old order gave way to a new order, that forces the Japanese people to discuss the education in their country and the future of their polite and disciplined culture. Many notice the inevitable confrontation between the parties: the pupils, which are Japan’s future generation, want to make real their personal and creative urges. Facing them is the educational establishment, which is one of the most conservative establishments in Japan. One local council recently sent a letter to the parents of the local schools pupils, in which they were asked to refresh their children’s memory as to the basics of discipline and politeness. This is an unusual letter. Japanese reminding themselves to behave politely are like a fish, reminding itself to swim.

In a discussion over educational issues, the pupils were recently asked what qualities they would like to see in a teacher. Many of them said they would like to have a teacher that understands them more and that is “cool”. A junior high pupil said he would like “someone that will take off his tie and play with us, that will be accessible and will know what children like”. But most



teachers are not willing to play this role. Most of them were trained for something completely different – for students who won't open their mouths.

Another side of the problem is that teachers and parents blame each other in braking the discipline. It is possible that Japan is suffering from the Chinese "little emperor" syndrome, due to the drop in birth rate to 1.4 children per family. Only children, especially in a wealthy society, may become more exposed to the abundance of attention and material pleasures, and become little

tyrants in their homes and schools. "Yes, our children are spoiled", says Mr. Tushieko Miagawa, an expert in education. "The homes became 'air pockets', in which the children can do whatever they desire".

But there are some that believe that the hour has come for them to adjust to the sign of the times. "Schools should act as business firms", says Luana Matsuy, chairman of the national parents association. "They should answer the altering needs of their clients – in this case, the pupils".

What are the reasons for the main crises that the educational system is facing?

When I analyze the difficulties that appear in this article and in many articles similar to this one that are published all over the world lately, I assume that the educational system in the world is in deep crisis. There are, in my opinion, three main reasons that led to this situation –

1. The lack of communication between the employment market and the educational system – assuming that the educational system is supposed to prepare its pupils to the future world that takes place outside the school, and simultaneously to be a microcosms of the reality. "The school", that was set up to be a preparation and training program to working at the factory of the industrial revolution, is not adjusting to the changes that occur and are expected to occur in the employment market. The "old" school is trying to maintain the frameworks in which it was created – in a world where the successful worker acted as a "state of the art robot" (Charlie Chaplin in "Modern Times"). Therefore the pupil's main goal in that school was to practice procedures of complying and be educated to obedience. A close relative of that school, which continues to operate until today with minor changes only, is having a hard time finding solutions to education to entrepreneurship, creativity, developing the imagination and the thinking that are the present and future needs of the progressive employment market.
2. The revolution in the subject of human and child's rights and its manifestations at the school – the traditional school was set up in a world that is substantially different in its perception of the concept of human rights. The 20th century was clearly more aware of women and minority's rights and lately the notion of child's rights has been strongly accepted. The recent family is very different, almost all over the world, than that of the beginning of the century. The main change is in listening to the woman's and the children's voices in the new family. The new family, in which the child's position is complicated, different and not yet clear, displays many difficulties in adjusting to the new



situation. S/he arrives to a school in which the human rights revolution had not yet created the essential change. This encounter is a complicated and hard one, and it is currently causing many problems for the people involved in it. If a proof is needed it can be found in the large number of schools in which there are struggles between parents and teachers.



3. The information and communication revolution and the encounter with the school – a school that considers its primary goal to provide missing information to the pupil, is now becoming rapidly useless. That is because new technological means perform this task in more efficient ways, that improve rapidly.

Why the solutions of more... of what has failed... will continue to fail –

The educational system tries to deal with the crises it faces using three basic ways, which Valtchevic, Wikland and Fish define, in their book “change” as the basic ways for unsuccessful problem solving.

- A. Denying the existence of the problem – and action is required, yet none is taken: “this does not happen in OUR school ...” ; “don’t exaggerate, we are the products of the same system ...” ; “what was will continue to be and we can’t change that ...”
- B. Attempts are being made to change difficulties that cannot be changed or that do not exist – actions that are not needed are taken. Changes are made in the school as part of an unorganized race after the contemporary “IN”. Some of these changes contradict each other. As a result we witness the phenomenon of schools “flooded” with projects.
- C. When the solution is actually the problem and we try to solve the problem by more of the same solution. More values education, more discipline, more competitiveness ... the solution is the the more the merrier.

The systems tries to deal with these crises with the tools it knows had produced change in the past – with “more of the same thing” that created the current situation in the first place. In other words, the general assumption is that the solutions are known, we only have to carry them out better, in a more right way.

The outcome is a system that is less effective and relevant which leads to hard feelings of frustration for many who deal with education – educators and others.

“The fable of the cocking frog” in Peter Senge’s The Learning Organization, that is mentioned as an example for organizational learning dysfunction, describes, in my opinion, how the education system had gradually cooked itself to death over the last 100 years and the difficulties in recruiting the forces needed to carry out the required change:

The fable tells that if you put a frog in a pot filled with boiling water it’ll jump right out. However, if you put the same frog in a pot filled with room temperature water it will stay in the pot swimming about in the water. If you place this pot over a stove and gradually increase the temperature of the water the frog will still stay in the pot and boil to death. Why, you ask?



Because the frog's sensors, which are there to protect it from threats to its survival, are set to notice sudden or dramatic changes in the frog's environment rather than slow gradual ones.

Similarly, the educational system did not adapt to the gradual social and cultural changes that have occurred over that last century, and thus it finds itself today unable to achieve the goals for which it was established.

Democratic-education solutions –

The new conditions force us to create a new educational system that is based on a new, democratic conceptual world. It is high time we stopped fruitlessly trying to fix or improve the old educational system that is based on the world of the past and lacks democratic awareness. To be relevant the system must undergo a substantial change in defining its objectives and its tools and methods for achieving these objectives. This self "redefinition" will, in my opinion, lead to a new interpretation for the term school.

The old school is set to prepare the student for adjusting to the reality that is portrayed as a definite one.

The redefined school will be designed to help the students develop their own powers to choose and to create the reality they want to live in, and to help them see the reality as a diversified, multi-directional one.

After this redefinition, the student will be shifted from the passive position s/he occupied in the old school that defined for the student his or hers goals, objectives, desired outcomes and the exact ways to achieve these.

The futuristic school I describe will see as its main goal shifting the student to an active place in the system so that the school could become a field for experimenting and training taking control over his or hers life.

In school the students will focus on identifying their personal and social goals and will develop the abilities needed to set their lives in accord with these goals. In addition, the school will promote human rights and will maintain them in the school.

The name we use to describe this new system is "**A Democratic School.**"

The democratic school does not offer a magical solution to the situation at hand. It offers possible futuristic directions.

The goals of the democratic school are:

1st goal - **Education for independence** –

I define this goal as follows: to assist the student in creating and acquiring tools that will help him or her in the attempt to achieve his or hers goals.

The old school would change this definition thus:

To direct the student the knowledge and the tools that would help him or her in the attempt



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to achieve the goals set by society or by other people.



Why did I use the term “tools” neglecting the term “knowledge”?

Because in a world that changes so rapidly, specific bits of information are not significant over time. However, the “emotional intelligence” that a student develops throughout the learning process carries meaning beyond place and time. This is the “baggage” that the student will take along, processing it and adjusting it for dealing with the next goal.

This means that we could meet two students of the same age, background and knowledge who would get a similar evaluation in the old school. And yet, if we look at them from a different direction we’ll find out that the process of acquiring this knowledge have hurt one of them (e.g. his self-esteem) will strengthening the other. That is, when we look at these students through emotional-intelligence-glasses we see huge differences.

When we speak of “tools” we primarily mean strengthening the emotional intelligence that will assist the students in identifying their goals and achieving them.

The roll of the adult is to assist in the process of creating and acquiring the tools, and thus in strengthening their independence and diminishing their dependence on the teacher and other educational personnel. Simply stated, the traditional roll of merely transferring information does not deliver the goods any more.

The key question that will escort the teacher in the democratic education is “am I, in my interaction with my pupil, making his independence stronger?”

And the key question for the student will be “am I a more independent person today?”

2nd goal - **Education for human dignity** –

I define this goal thus - creating an educational framework that sees its primary goal in education for human dignity, as it is defined in the bill of human rights.

The democratic school - considers maintaining human rights in school a fundamental and essential condition that has to be met before education for human dignity may begin.

The educational intentions take place in three circles –

1st – **my** human rights, **our** human rights.

2nd – the rights of the **other**, the **different**.

3rd – the entire humanity.

The old school - also claims that education for rights is very important. However, its main goal is to teach the students human dignity and rights rather than to change the school system or the teachers’ behavior accordingly.



As early as the beginning of the century, Yanoosh Kortchak wrote in a collection of articles “the child’s right for dignity” about attempting to improve the educational system through more emphasize on “educating the child for respect ...” He claims about the adults, the educators that “in stead of focusing on how to improve ourselves ... we gave up the struggle with ourselves, and put its load on the children’s shoulders. The educator eagerly adopts the adult’s prerogative: not to monitor ourselves but the children, not our wrongdoings to record but those of the children.”

Kortchak suggests scholastic mechanisms that would make school a place that upholds human rights. One example is the “comrades’ court” discussed in Kortchak’s “How to Love a Child”:

“If I devote an unproportionally large amount of time to the court—I do that out of the recognition that the court may be the link that will lead to giving equal rights to the child, to creating a constitution and to the publication of the child’s rights declaration. The child has a right to a serious treatment and a just study of his or hers affairs. Up till now everything hinged upon the educator’s good will, and upon his or her mood. The child had no right even to protest. This tyranny must come to an end.”

Why now is the time –

Andrew Grove, the manager of Intel, describes in his book Growth out of Crisis a time in the life of an organization in which its foundation are about to change. He calls this process “a strategic turning point.” Grove says “... a strategic turning point can appear due to a technological change, but they are more than merely a technological change ... the old strategic picture disappears and gives way to a new one ... sometimes it is difficult to define what has actually changed, and yet you know that something has ...
... a strategic turning point that has not been dealt with properly can be fatal ... but strategic turning points do not always or necessarily lead to catastrophe. When the methods of management change an opportunity is created for elements that succeed in operating in the new way. This applies to new as well as existing elements for which the strategic turning point may be an opportunity for a new growth period.”

In my opinion the education system is at an obvious strategic turning point. The fundamental conditions for the operation of the system have changed:

- The goals have changed
- The tools have changed
- The target audience has changed

As stated by Grove, this strategic turning point can either ruin the system or strengthen it.



Some of the changes suggested by the democratic education are not heard for the first time, but it is the first time that the general education systems start to apply them. These changes are not only a ticket out of the present crisis, but are also the way to harness the opportunities that come with the strategic turning point for new and exciting growth.

Those who deny the need for a planned change in the education will say the direction suggested by the democratic education has been there for ever (Socrates, Rousseau, Mill, Dai, Kortchak and others). But they have left their mark only in the language of education and not in the schools themselves.

My answer to these skeptics is that words have always preceded action, with the classic example being the American constitution; only about 130 years after it was written did white women get the right to vote, and it took an additional 40 years to achieve this right for African-American women. There are countless examples showing that in many cases words are swallows that announce the spring.

I believe that the educational system is ready to make the transition from statements to action.

The situation today is different from the past since the past experiences were done top to bottom, that is from the academy or the intellectual elite to the field. Today, on the other hand, the pressures come from different directions – from field educational personnel, from the parents, from the students, from the makers of educational policy, from the academy and from the work places.

We are in a completely new situation, one that demands a thorough and urgent change, one of whose not arbitrary direction, for the public who wants to live in a democratic world, is the democratic school.



Play / Yacov Hecht

Let's play "pretend"

Let's imagine a different reality

In which all the schools are democratic!

But the states are totalitarian.

... than they would say: democracy is a good thing for little groups of hundreds of people, but it could never work for countries with millions of citizens.

... than they would say: democracy is good for school, where you deal with children's stuff. But it would be irresponsible to let ignorant, uneducated people to decide upon the fate of countries in matters of life and death.

... than they would say: how could you suggest that anyone could run for president? What if an evil stupid hypocrite would win the elections?

... than they would say: do you really believe that millions of citizens will understand and remember the rules? That everybody will understand the principles of democracy? This is only suitable for intellectuals!

... than they would say: if each and everyone could choose his or hers occupation no one would do the dirty hard works—the country will fall apart!

... than they would say: if each and everyone could choose were to live, where to hang out, where to go, when and what for to demonstrate and strike, if every newspaper could publish what it deems right—anarchy will take over.

... than they would say: democracy is suitable for schools, where everything is small and safe, but in the real world it could never work.

"... in the 50's about 35% of the citizens of Britain still believed that the queen was chosen by god ..."

Masa Aher, 87.