

DEMOCRACY BEGINS AT SCHOOL

A new world trend in education

Imagine, for a moment, that your children were given considerable freedom to choose *what* to learn, *how* to learn, and to some degree, even *when* to learn. What do you suppose would happen? Would they run amok? Would their academic performance whither as they romp into frivolous pursuits? Would they ever bother to learn anything worthwhile? Yet this seems to be one of the main objectives characterising a new and growing trend called ‘democratic education’.

On my first visit to a democratic primary school, I was immediately struck by how dissimilar it was to anything I remembered from my school days. In place of neatly ordered rows with children perched at their desks, I saw a rabble of children spread all over the classroom; some sitting alone at a table, appearing quietly engrossed in a text or activity, others were mobbing a teacher on the floor, scrambling to get as much information from her as they could. Each child appeared purposefully absorbed in their own project, some in small groups, some seemingly content with their own company.

This classroom had nothing of the formality and officiousness I recall from my own school experience. I was confronted by an unfamiliar absence of restraint; the teacher-pupil tension and uneasy control dynamic that would seem ordinary was missing. If anything, the teacher seemed more like a friend or an auntie than a figure of authority. To sum it up, the children were in a child-friendly environment.

I remember when teachers and grown-ups loomed large and intimidating, and when, at least face-to-face, we treated them with deference. The schoolchildren of yore were in a subordinate role - but here I was faced with poised, up-front kids who seemed mature and confident beyond their years. As a visitor, they treated me respectfully - but like a person, not like an ‘authority’.

In place of the stressed-out teachers struggling to maintain control of a class; these seemed to be having fun with their kids. Whereas I remember teachers having to herd pupils into every new activity, working hard to maintain their focus and attention; here I saw children in the active role, emphatically drawing the learning from their teacher. This novel approach to education came across as pleasurable and exciting.

World conference on democratic education

The ‘democratic’ approach to education is not an isolated experiment, limited to one or two schools here and there. In fact, the schools I visited belong to a dynamic and growing international network of democratically run schools. They form part of an evolving movement devoted to teaching children democratic values and responsibilities by immersing them in a democratic environment.

Last year (2002), an International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) was held in Christchurch, New Zealand. It was attended by around 200 teachers and school principals from ten countries. The IDEC conference is held annually (this year it will be held in

New York), to facilitate the exchange of experience, research and development. Organisations such as IDEN (International Democratic Education Network) and ADSA (Australian Democratic Schools Association) provide an additional forum for discussion, debate, research and mutual support, through which this innovative and revolutionary method can continually be refined and perfected.

Definition of ‘democratic education’

Participants at the Christchurch conference took little time to agree upon a satisfactory definition of ‘democratic education’. They established that Article 26(2) of the International Declaration of Children’s Rights, which is directed toward freedom, tolerance and understanding, constitutes a working framework for the day-to-day practice in democratic learning environments. In a nutshell, this means that students are given a vote over curricular and administrative decisions that affect their lives. However, it was recognised and accepted that within this defining matrix there is a broad spectrum of variation. Some schools are almost totally non-directive with their pupils, while others offer a more conservative blend of direction and negotiation.

Democratic education in practice

These schools aim to promote the democratic values of egalitarianism, tolerance, pluralism, freedom, social and environmental responsibility, by modelling and living these values in the classroom. They contend that the best way to learn these values is by living them day-to-day from the earliest years. This is a bold move, since the schools most of us went to were anything but democratic institutions. We did as we were told, and we were punished, often physically, for infractions to the rules imposed on us. We were told what to learn, how to learn and when to learn, and denied significant choices until age 16.

In a democratic school, each child is given as much control as is feasible over his or her learning journey. Compulsion is replaced by self-determination, obedience by responsibility. Within certain limits, children self-regulate the schedule of their learning and have a significant voice in the choice of subject matter. In pre-school, for instance, a number of activities are simultaneously available at different work areas. Children move independently from one activity to another, remaining longest with what most arouses their fascination – although group activity is encouraged. What fuels each child’s progress is therefore not the teacher’s pressure, but his own natural interest, her thirst for discovery and mastery.

A fundamental principle is that children are more motivated to learn, and they learn better, to the extent that they have *choice* over how and what they learn.

Many democratic schools also give children a vote on any administrative decisions regarding the day-to-day running of the school which would impact them personally. ‘If they are to live in a free world,’ explains Olga Leontieva, Russian educator, ‘they must be educated as free persons’ (‘Education Revolution’, Summer 2002) Thus, democracy in

education is not only about freedom. It is also about responsibility, and about providing a broad spectrum of social and civic education that includes - but is not limited to - academic subjects.

Democratic processes in the classrooms include voting, council meetings and the forming of committees. Debate and questioning are encouraged, in order to foster critical thinking.

The teacher-student relationship is unusually equal and non-authoritarian. Referred to by their first-names, teachers are viewed by pupils as older and knowledgeable friends and guides. They are respected as partners in a collaborative education process. They are there to help, to inspire and to provide learning tools and opportunities rather than to direct or dictate. This dialogical relationship gives children more room to grow into self-motivated and self-responsible individuals. They work in pursuit of their own goals, rather than to please someone in authority.

Many democratic schools encourage parents to participate in classroom activities. This makes the school environment more familiar, and builds a sense of community. By taking part in their child's education, parents can become close to their friends and teachers. Particularly for the younger kids, this measure reduces, even eliminates separation anxiety, by softening the boundary between school and home. To the child, the school feels much like an extended family, or village.

Learning processes in democratic schools are specially adaptive to each child's unique learning style. Learning programmes are individually tailored, to suit even the more idiosyncratic minds. This flexibility and responsiveness to the individual enables every child to feel recognised and valued. It is not unusual to see children all working on something different. Yaacov Hecht, Israeli educator, is one of the leading lights of the democratic education movement. He maintains that every individual has a unique learning profile, so standardised methodology can do many students a disservice and limit or narrow the scope of their development. In this environment, children learn first-hand that they and all others have a unique and worthy contribution to make. Whereas many children who have difficulty fitting in risk being diagnosed or falling through the cracks, the democratic model insists on tuning-in to every child's unique style of information processing, and reaching each child according to his or her proclivities, until he or she begins to thrive. This requires teachers to be particularly keen listeners and observers. It also requires them to be open-minded about the surprising diversity of keys that unlock the minds of each individual.

The object is to locate each child's personal passion, and to harness this force to educational purposes. Driven by passion, a child's thirst for learning is almost bottomless. What I saw in the classroom I visited was every child in hot pursuit of learning, and coercion was conspicuous by its absence. Instead of the teacher working hard to get the children to pay attention, they played a more passive role: that of being available to the volley of questions and calls for assistance. Thus the child's immense

reservoir of energy for play, creativity and exploration are co-opted in the service of learning.

This method implies a commitment to honour each child's right to be playful. In fact, democratic educationists recognise that play is the engine of learning. They not only emphasise that learning *can* be fun, but also that learning *should* be fun. Playfulness is a product of evolution, because through play we develop and perfect essential skills. Play makes learning attractive, and assists memory retention, it is a rehearsal for new skills and dexterities. When children are enjoying learning for its own sake, rather than competing, or trying to live up to what adults expect of them, motivation ceases to be an issue. One democratic primary school had, until recently, a no homework policy. When some of the children heard about the idea of homework, they began to demand it. They *actually wanted* to carry on schooling at home! In response to pupils' demands, this school has been handing out homework assignments ever since. I remember homework being a battleground, a particularly gloomy venture foisted upon us against our will.

Learning is most powerful when playful, personally relevant and meaningful to the child. So, almost anything that captures a child's attention can be deftly turned into a learning opportunity. For example: one class's fascination with a frog was transformed into a long-term study project covering biology and the rudiments of scientific observation. The Harry Potter craze was exploited in a number of creative ways. It provided fodder for lessons in character study, developing writing skills in various genres, even interpretive design and three dimensional visual-spatial skills, based on drawing or constructing models of buildings described in the books. A camping trip became the background for solving complex mathematical problems, such as calculating areas, and deducing the size of ground sheets needed to accommodate a number of tents.

The process of self-discovery is given paramount importance in democratic schools. Children are given much support to find and follow their hearts, their inner truth, and to give their unique gifts the fullest possible expression. They are not told who, what or how they should be - they are helped to trust and develop their own purpose and potential. The teacher's role is to support this process by providing the opportunities and tools that are most appropriate to each child's unfolding.

The faculties of reasoning and critical thinking are considered to be at least as important as the narrow focus on right or wrong answers to a problem. There are many instances in which democratic educators try to accommodate a number of 'right' answers, as a way of honouring each child's developing thought process, and their unique perspectives.

Competition is de-emphasised or non-existent in democratic schools. Instead, they place a very strong emphasis on the development of emotional intelligence, relationship skills, conflict resolution skills, co-operation - the stuff of success in human relations that underpins all other successes in life. They devote substantial time and attention to helping children develop a secure emotional centre, and a strong sense of self-worth. Alongside academic subjects, children receive opportune instruction on appropriate assertiveness, negotiation, empathy and listening skills, and clear self-expression. Day-to-day social

interactions, in the classroom or the playground, are sometimes turned into valuable lessons for healthy relating.

Discipline issues

In practice, it appears that bullying is less of a problem when children are given more choices, when they love what they are doing at school, and when they feel personally valued there. Nevertheless, democratic schools have come up with a number of innovative solutions for dealing with student conflicts, bullying or disruptive behaviour. Any persistent behavioural problems are discussed openly in the classroom. Students and the teacher take turns voicing their feelings, opinions, and creative solutions are derived through group consensus. Thus, the kinds of everyday conflicts ordinarily viewed as nuisances and interruptions, are made use of as experiential lessons about relationship.

In a school at Christchurch, New Zealand, students who quarrel request communal conflict resolution with the aid of an elected chairperson, who is another child in the class. The process is supervised and moderated by a teacher.

Group processes such as these short circuit conflict or bullying before it escalates. In place of punishment, blame or shame, they provide a healing process. ‘Bullies’ are supported in finding appropriate expression for their pain, and ‘victims’ are shown resources for self-assertion, setting boundaries, and asking for help. The object of such interventions is to help children grow in social sensitivity and responsibility.

How big is democratic education globally?

The influence of democracy in education has spread rapidly, far and wide. In Japan, what they call the ‘free school system’ now claims nearly one hundred schools. Some students, wishing to continue learning along democratic lines, have created their own university. Japanese research showing the success of ‘free schools’ has prompted a recommendation to government that state schools be democratised, in order to combat their massive problems of school refusal and bullying. These problems, which have been linked to the rigid, high-pressure and highly competitive culture of mainstream Japanese education, are far less present in the ‘free schools’.

There are at least 250 such schools or similar in the USA, where home-schooling is also common as a reaction against the regimentation and punitive nature of their regular school system.

Nowhere is democratic education more developed than in Israel. For Israeli educator Yaacov Hecht, this schooling system has profound social implications that stretch beyond the churning out of good academic performers. Having founded over twenty-two democratic schools in Israel, Hecht is now the head of the Israeli Institute for Democratic Education. He has established an Academic Department of Democratic Education in ‘Hakibbutzim College’ in Tel-Aviv, which conducts research and development, trains new teachers in democratic methods, and publishes four books a year in the field. What propels the visionary Yaacov Hecht is his conviction that the democratisation of schools will create individuals that are more self-directed, socially responsible, and more

embracing of human diversity – a vital insurance for the future of humankind. In keeping with this larger social-ecological purpose, the Institute operates an ambitious project called ‘education for peace’ which currently includes a program to democratise over 100 regular public schools.

The Israeli and Japanese experiences suggest that the trend to make education more democratic and more child-centred, extends beyond the schools that call themselves ‘democratic’. Democratic education principles have been gradually penetrating many mainstream and alternative schools.

In England, there are dozens of schools that embrace principles of democratic education to varying degrees. The oldest one, ‘Summerhill’, has been operating successfully for over 80 years, and it serves as a model for a large number of schools worldwide.

As the trend toward more democratic education gathers momentum, more such schools have opened in New Zealand, Germany, Denmark, Russia, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Nepal and India.

Democratic Schools in Australia

There are a number of schools in Australia that incorporate elements of democratic education in varying but significant degrees. To the best of my knowledge, Sydney has four primary schools and two high-schools, with at least four more around NSW. Throughout the other states, there are roughly twenty more schools affiliated with the democratic education system.

What about the ‘bottom line’?

Even in the schools claiming the most democratic methods, there are limits to freedom of choice. As is every other school, they are required to equip children with a range of examinable, standard basic skills, as dictated by government. They differ by providing a greater variety of approaches to the learning of these skills.

So, what happens when children are given a vote on their educational lives? Can children, with some guidance, chart their own course for learning? Or would this experiment prove to be reckless, a failure, would it lead to chaos? In practice, democratic educators find that kids do not tend to take advantage of their freedoms in order to slack-off - they are hungry for learning. A recent study commissioned by David Blunkett, the English minister for education, looked at the academic results, exclusion data and attendance rates for 12 English democratic high-schools from a diverse range of socio-economic areas. A statistical analysis was run by ‘Ostfed’, the English school inspection service. On all these variables, Ostfed found that the democratic schools performed better than expected, compared to the national average. The overwhelming view of head-teachers and senior managers was that student participation in curriculum design benefited their self-esteem, motivation, sense of personal responsibility - for themselves and their school community - and this in turn enhanced their attainment. The study commented favourably on attendance levels and student motivation to learn.

In Japan, the 'free school' system has successfully controlled the epidemic problems of bullying and school refusal while maintaining a standard of academic performance.

Closer to home, when a Sydney democratic school that has been in operation for thirty years conducted an informal study of a number of its graduates, they found that almost all of them had progressed successfully through high school, had obtained UAI scores higher than 90, and hence been accepted into their chosen tertiary courses.

But democratic schools also address dimensions of achievement and human potential not measured by basic skills criteria and academic success. Perhaps Yaacov Hecht has a point, when he links this style of education to social evolution and world peace. Close by, a Palestinian refugee named Hussein Issa, dreamed of educating children non-traditionally, in the principles of Peace, Democracy and Tolerance. He formed a democratic school with Israeli Eyal Bloch, near Bethlehem. Children from these two otherwise antagonistic cultures were bussed weekly to shared grounds, where they learned each other's language, prayers, customs, heard each others' traditional songs, and forged deep bonds of friendship, through the vehicle of a co-operative agricultural project. They called it the Hope Flower Project. In a world that is riven by ethnic hatred, dictatorship and cataclysmic weaponry, one can hardly imagine a more vital educational emphasis.

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