

The Third Wave Present, Vision and Mission

The Present- the Third Wave

The Democratic School in Hadera was established in Israel in 1987.

The school was founded on a long tradition of free and open schools that have operated in Israel throughout the last century. Choosing the name Democratic School reflected an insight of its founders - the wish to align school values with the central themes of a democratic society, themes such as freedom of thought, freedom of opinion and expression, etc. In keeping with that, a decision was made to adopt the two leading values of democratic society and make them the central principles in school:

- 1 .adhering to human rights within the school framework.
- 2 .operating school life on the basis of democratic procedures.

Today, 16 years later, there are 25 democratic schools in Israel and each year new schools are added to the growing circle.

The leading rationale underlining the foundation of democratic schools is the autonomy of each group to create its own unique democratic framework while adhering to the two central principles of human rights and democratic procedure. The role of the initiating group is to provide its own interpretations to these concepts.

1995 was the fateful year of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination.

The then minister of education, Mr . Amnon Rubinstein, approached Mr. Yakov Hecht, then Head of The Democratic School in Hadera and asked him to design a program for democratic education that will encompass the entire school system in Israel. This was a grand opportunity to leverage the ideology of democratic education in Israel.

It was also the key impetus for the foundation of The Institute for Democratic Education, which aimed at studying and processing the experience gleaned in

democratic schools and turning it into tools for changing educational systems. This program is no longer available due to political reasons but in the 6 years of its operation 200 schools from all sectors of Israeli society: religious, secular, Arab, Bedouin, Kibbutz, periphery and center have incorporated processes of democratization into their framework.

The Institute for Democratic Education is approached daily by many schools seeking assistance in processes of change. This, we believe, attests to the success of the program, and yet we feel that the main breakthrough of the Institute in recent years has been the introduction of democratization processes to local authorities. This initiative came as a response to the growing difficulties we were facing vis a vis the authorities who tried to block democratization processes. In order to solve this problem we designed the concept of regional democratization processes in which the basic rationale was the idea of Integration of Colors. We realized that as long as different groups and institutions operate each on their own, trying to overcome obstacles their own way, there will never be an end to conflict. The Integration of Colors means that all forces operating in a specific region come together, recognize their different colors (uniqueness) and strive together to achieve the well being of their community. This was an evolution of the basic idea underlying our work in democratic schools, namely that each student is encouraged to discover his own unique color as well as to recognize the color of the other and thus create a multicolor tapestry for a better future in a better world. The first place to begin this somewhat grandiose endeavor was in the southern part of Israel in a small town called Mitzpe Ramon.

In 1999 the mayor of Mitzpe Ramon, an isolated town of 5700 residents in the desert, commissioned the Institute for Democratic Education for designing a program that will transform its educational system and make it a loadstone for people seeking high quality life and better education for their children. Working with the entire community in Mitzpe Ramon, residents, students, private businesses, public organizations, tourist service system, local artists and more, the Institute is forming a unique educational system where every student chooses a general as well as an individual curriculum from a diverse range of possibilities - ecological farms, the planetarium, the geological museum, the supermarket, the bank, hotels etc.

The Institute for Democratic Education is now running such programs in five other regions that have launched a similar process, each place forming its own unique educational model which suits the specific locus and its inhabitants.

As much as it would seem a breakthrough in the educational system in Israel it would be wrong to assume that this was the first time such approach was taken. We find it is very important to compare the present situation in the educational system with past phenomena in order to draw our lessons with regards to the future. There have been three distinct waves in alternative education in the 20th Century:

The **first wave** occurred during the twenties and the thirties and was called “**new education**” or “**progressive education**”.

The **second wave** took place during the seventies and was called “**open and free education**”.

The **present wave**, which started in the nineties, and was given the name “**democratic education**”.

The Vision- Democratic Culture

The first two waves took place when The Wave of Traditional Schooling, which started in the middle of the industrial revolution, was at its peak. Today, the educational system is facing a severe crisis all over the world. The world we live in becomes more and more democratic yet the schools, which prepare our children to life, operate in a non- democratic way and thus create a growing estrangement between school life and real life situations. This brings about the emergence of the third wave of democratic education that may transform a society based on democratic procedure into one that cultivates a democratic culture.

A democratic culture from the perspective of Integration of Colors is a society that abides by the following principles:

- a. Every person has the right to know and express his/her unique color
- b. Every person is capable of recognizing the unique color of every other member of the society.
- c. Every person is capable of understanding that the different color does not pose a threat but is rather an opportunity for the individual and the community as a whole.
- d. Every person understands the importance of supporting others around him in their quest to find their own unique color.
- e. Every person recognizes the fact that the integration of colors guarantees a world that chooses construction over destruction.
- f. All mechanisms of society are responsible for this Integration of Colors.

The Mission – A Learning Community

But life within a democratic culture is apparently not that simple. When we view the current wave of democratic education in light of the previous waves we realize that while the emergence of the waves usually indicates social/historical/political events such as the socialist movement during the Twenties, the war in Vietnam, the fall of the Berlin wall etc. their termination is brought about by social/psychological reasons. The same forces that bring to their termination could be the ones that would lead to the closure of the present wave. Two main forces curb ideas of freedom in education:

1. external forces – exerted by the system, which specialized in turning homogenizing differences.
2. internal forces – active in the adult world within revolutionary schools and make us prefer homogeneity to diversity. Erich H. Fromm wrote about this phenomenon in his book *Escape from Freedom*.

Even though the external forces have a relative harmful effect on the waves they are not the ones that eventually bring about their termination. It is the struggles between the strong ideological forces that unfortunately destroy them. By tracing the histories

of new/open/free schools we can see how they managed to skillfully do so. I have the feeling that democratic schools, too, might naturally follow the same path of destruction. In order to understand why this is so I have tried to analyze the dynamics of what I call “possible points of crisis” in a school life span and have come up with the following:

Three areas of crisis in school:

1. In forming a common vision, significant ideological gaps develop within the founding group. Possible results are:

- a. Dividing the group into several smaller ones
- b. Reaching a compromise that leads to a common vision.
- c. Dissolution of the group.

2. Toward the end of the first or second year people find that the school they formed is not what they had in mind. Possible results are:

- a. The minority leaves school.
- b. A compromise leads to changes in the school structure.
- c. The school ceases to exist.

3. At a certain point we see the arrival of adults (staff or parents) who are not willing to accept the culture that evolved over time and are trying to change it. Possible results are:

- a. The minority leaves school.
- b. A compromise leads to a change in the school structure.
- d. The school ceases to exist.

It is therefore quite clear that throughout the school history there are certain events in which adults (parents and staff) enter a struggle that may lead to the dissolution of their school. This brings us to the most important question: Why aren't adults capable of developing a constructive rather than a destructive dialogue?

The same democratic schools that have chosen to change the status of children within the educational system have forgotten that these students are supposed to meet various different adults – at home and in their schools – adults who never cease to learn, NOT adults who already know!

Adults who KNOW want to prove they are always right and this is why they create the world of knowledgeable adults where one camp of “adults who know” fights another camp of “adults who know”.

They thus gradually destroy the New World they seek to construct.

We, people who work in free/democratic schools, have never managed to come up with adequate answers to this predicament – we never found the proper way to develop a learning staff and a learning adult community.

I believe we must understand that democratic schools are not there only to serve students, they are there also for us, the adults. We founded new schools so that we, too, can engage in personal development and growth.

The quest for the “NEW” requires an overall communal change of adults and children alike. If we try to build a new school for our children without changing our world first, our effort is doomed to failure.

The most significant difference between this wave and the first two is that in our school it isn't the child that is at the center but rather **the human being**.

The foundation of a new school requires the creation of a learning community:

- A Learning Community that learns **through** processes of democratic education.
- A Learning Community that learns **about** democratic education.

And the creation of a Learning Community that learns through and about processes of democratic education is our MISSION!

I believe that dialogue and learning are just as contagious as fighting and ‘knowing’. Thus, what brings about the outburst of the virus is irrelevant. The most important thing is that somewhere it will start ‘infecting’ the world. One example of such virus is the ongoing discussion held in the past three years regarding the definition of democratic education which I believe is an important stage in the development of an International Learning Community.

This discussion, which started in Japan after eight IDEC conferences in which we never discussed the meaning of democratic education, brought a lot of tension to the surface among “the people who already knew”. It continued in 2002 in the conference in New Zealand where we expressed our willingness to give up the position of “adults who know” and reached its fruition in our discussions on the net throughout the last year.

We, the adult experts, have learnt that:

- We do not know what democratic education really is. (that is the prerequisite for a Learning Community)
- We learned how we can learn from each other. And this is very difficult, to learn, not to celebrate our victory.
- We started using sources of information – the Internet, books, publications, etc.
- We learned how to share our insights with others and how to benefit from those of others.

These four stages signify the beginning of our way to create diverse Learning Communities. The IDEC conferences, which evolved in a most fascinating way, serve as a pioneering model in this process – Adults who wear the appearance of experts and knowers shed this external appearance and reveal their doubts and dilemmas – and basically try to learn. Children and teenagers who live in democratic frameworks meet and find out that they are not alone in this world. Only a successful Integration

of Colors among people who live in the realm of democratic education may bring about the generation of a democratic culture in their educational frameworks: In IDEC and in the international sphere in general, in regional and national contacts, in schools. If we succeed in this mission, all gates to democratic culture in our societies will be opened to us.

This is our vision, but the million dollar question is do we, adults, really wish to change, do we sincerely want to learn? Are we at all capable of learning?

