

A Perspective on the Foundations of Democratic Governance in American Public Schools

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Abstract: In this paper I will try to lay out how I define and implement the most valued concept of our time at the school I have been working in for two years. I will analyze the questions below that I see critical in terms of “realizing” the democratic goals in a school environment. As the principal of a public school, what are difficulties that I face when I fight to incorporate the principles of democracy into governing bodies of our school? Where do I get the most challenge? What are the real benefits of having a school, which is “as democratic as possible”? Is there a dead end where you cannot further democratize the school? More tangibly, how do I democratically reestablish the relation between the school administration and students? How do I organize teacher and administration relations to make sure that their voices are heard and their votes are counted? What is the principal’s position within the community regarding getting all parties involved in the decision-making process?

What is a Democratic School?

Dewey defines democracy as “A democracy is more than a form of a government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of joint communicate experience.” (Dewey, 1916) I define democracy as the practice of the freedom that every human being has when s/he is born. Democratic education is the implementation of how we make ways to have students internalizes the very basic life requirement to be a human. “Life is a self-renewing process.” (Dewey, 1916) So do the democratic schools. A democratic school is a living organism that grows everyday toward the goal of having a totally democratic world. “We have seen that a community or social group sustains itself through continuous self-renewal, and that this renewal takes place by means of the educational growth of the immature members of the group” (Dewey, 1916). Those schools are the enterprises committing to the world peace beyond our imagination. Those students will some day turn this world a place that everybody takes the pleasure of “having a say.” If you want to talk about a democratic school, you should start with the question of where the decisions are made at that school. Is it at the discretion of an individual? Do the committees make it? Who is making the decision on what and how to teach? Who defines the goal of the school?

Understanding the Framework of Democratic Governance

At a democratic school, decisions should be made at where the majority wants them to be made. More clearly, before you make a decision, you ask who should make it. Just minutes ago, a social studies teacher asked me what she should do about the students who are suspended and their parents ask for the homework that they missed. I asked if you think it is me who should and can answer that. She puzzled a little. I said we have to make the policy at our staff meeting. I cannot tell you how you should proceed. There are several cases new to almost everyone. Teachers think they should be just instructed of what to do. That feeling is one of the enemies of the democratic thinking ability. “Effective principals value dialogue that encourages teachers to reflect on their learning and practice. The study revealed five primary talking strategies: make suggestions, give feedback, model, use inquiry and solicit advice/ opinions, and praise.” (Joseph, 2001) My duty is to encourage all teachers to regard themselves as a part of decision making. My position might be just to vote at the meeting just like one of them.

At one of the department head meetings last year, I suggested that we should set up some committees. Those committees will function like the think tank groups of the school and advice on their mission to several entities. One of them will be a group who would solely reflect on how democratic the school is. At first sight, this might be regarded as an easy task. But when you start taking a look around and see how many holes there are, you just get overwhelmed. They came with tons of suggestions and criticism varying from election systems to the

positions of the school. They came to the conclusion that the school is not democratic at all! I am not offended with that, though.

What I am trying to say is if democratizing our schools is just in the hands of some individuals, the process is already doomed to fail. What those individuals should first do is to encourage the entire community to get on board. It is critical that everybody should be accountable and feel accountable to democratize the school at the same level. "Democratic schools need to be based on a broad definition of "WE"." (Apple, Beane, 1995) Students, teachers, parents, administrators, paraprofessionals and all other elements of community must be on the same page. That is the only way to avoid looking for scapegoats. If we succeed, it is all our success. If we fail, that is the sin of all of us.

The Role of Principals

The principal should be the advocate of democratization at every aspect of the school program. "A trained person is one who can do the chief things..." (Dewey, 1916) Therefore, he/she should regard the institutionalization of democracy as his primary job description. The more the school democratized the more functional and efficient the school becomes. Here at this point the challenge might seem like to be losing the authority to rule. Actually sharing responsibility just saves the principal in the future if anything goes wrong. Don't you think so?

Another difficulty is getting the staff members to believe that they are the ones who should make decisions. Most people are used to the routine and do not want to take responsibility. "The leaders' ability to keep and maintain engaging personal relations with teacher, students and staff members enhanced the flow of information they received and increased their chances of encouraging experimenters at just the right time." (Gross, 1998) That's where we need the talents of the administrators. Teachers are the ones actually realizing the reasons of being in a school. "Methods of instruction and administration need to be modified to allow and to secure direct and continuous occupations with things." (Dewey, 1916) Hence, it is absurd to ignore their roles in the decision-making policy.

However, it is even harder to draw students into the system, as they are the most neglected ones. What good is education if we are making people out of those students who do not even have the self-confidence to raise his/her voice? "If teachers are to succeed, they must meet students where they are..." (Hammond, 1997). What good is a school if interaction between the all others and students is not democratic?

One of the best ways students might actualize themselves is helping out to democratize the school. They should consider themselves right at the center of this process. "Children, if they could express themselves articulate and sincerely, would tell a different tale..." (Dewey, 1916) When they have that freedom, they would be the ones who would change. Curriculum, discipline policy and all the other major plans of the school governance should be made considering their point of views. They might be able to change if some things go wrong. "Learners often bring with them very firm expectations of how their problems should be addressed." (Farquharson, 1995) Therefore, at every step of the decision making process, their voices should be heard.

If you have the least idea about leadership, it is to get things done through others. If you know anything about sorting problems out in the school, it is all about getting the community in the game, especially parents. "Our action is socially controlled because we endeavor to refer what we are to do the same situation in which he is acting." (Dewey, 1916) Therefore, school and education is not and cannot be isolated from the society. Actually what we are doing is just enforcing what is happening at home or in the street or in the society. If we have discipline problems, that is just the extension of whatever is out there. If the students have a lack of an interest in learning, it is safe to say they lack motivation out there. "The presence of authentic instructional leadership can be witnessed in the everyday acts of people who take the responsibility for improving the teaching and learning in the entire school community, and its effectiveness revealed in a variety of measures of student achievement. (King, 2002) In essence, life out of the school is somewhat shaping up the schools. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the principal to make sure everyone who has a touch on what is going on at the school should be at the school, too.

Parents should not just show up at the PTAs or PACs. They have to make a habit of making themselves visible for everything that might affect the future of their kids. "An education which should unify the disposition of the members of society would do much to unify the society itself." (Dewey, 1916) Having such fancy ideas about parental involvement, I cannot forget my disappointment at the day I attended the first PAC meeting. Out of three hundred parents, only a handful showed up. I took the issue up with the PAC president and told her how disappointed I was. What might be turning off those parents to join at least one meeting? I wrote a letter to all parents and did not try to hide my disappointment at all. They have to understand that without their support we are nothing.

I will take further steps to make sure they feel more pressure from me to get them more democratized and care for their children. I provided them my direct phone line number. I have an open door policy. I asked them to take advantage of it. I booked a hotel conference room downtown to eliminate the distance problem.

It is also clear that there are some other factors outside of the school that really have an effect on education. "In what is termed politics, democratic social organization makes provision for this direct participation in control: in the economic region, control remains external and autocratic." (Dewey, 1916) I am sure most politicians would not like that! However I do agree with Dewey on that! Politicians and all other policy makers who are not in daily operation of the schools should also be involved in reality.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I will go with what Dewey says almost a century ago. "But we are doubtless far from realizing the potential efficacy of education as a constructive agency of improving society, from realizing that it represents not only a development of children and youth, but also of the future of the society of which they will be the constituents." (Dewey, 1916) We have to see that school and society are two sides of the same coin. We cannot solve the problems of one component if one is just feeding each other. We have to develop policies that will not just be enforced at the school but also in the society, as well. "Administrators, teachers, parents, parents and community members work hard to make education especially valuable for students in these schools." (Gross, 1998) "In many ways unequal access to education threatens the foundation of democratic society" (Hammond, 1997) Therefore, parents, politicians and the other agents of the society should be equally accountable. It is not enough to fail the child and the school!

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