

Democracy and Schools

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Abstract

Democracy has been a main theme of my work and life. So I write here now for two personal reasons at age 90:

* Democracy is under attack by our new President Donald Trump and his administration and supporters. His efforts need to be opposed.

* A good place to start an opposition is in the schools. The public schools, if they become more Democratic, can be a model and perpetrator for democratic practices.

Key concepts:

School democracy, Trumpism.

Resumo

A democracia tem sido um tema principal do meu trabalho e da minha vida. Aos 90 anos, escrevo aqui e agora por dois motivos pessoais:

* A democracia está sendo atacada pelo nosso novo presidente Donald Trump, sua administração e apoiantes. Os seus esforços devem ser contrariados.

* Um bom lugar para começar uma oposição é nas escolas. As escolas públicas, se elas se tornarem mais democráticas, podem ser um modelo e um perpetrador para práticas democráticas

Palabras-chave:

Democracia escolar. Trumpismo.

1. School democracy, Trumpism

This word *Democracy* and its meanings in practice have not been popular topics among educators and politicians over my very long career. My interest began in the 8th grade when I won a medal from a conservative Veterans organization in my home town of Beverly Hills for an essay on the topic.

But as the years passed, I became disillusioned that in my country our talk was more *talk* than reality and it seldom was up front in discussions of school reform and the importance of Democratic schools for all children. This includes the children of immigrants and schools promoting intergroup cultural understanding. But now Trumpism in the US and in parts of Europe is bringing the word and its meaning much more attention.

In the US we think we invented Democracy and practice it so we don't bother talking about it. But there is an urgency today to talk and think about it. Trumpism here is the reason. Democracy is clearly under attack in the US by Trump and his administration and by many of his supporters. And clearly the same attacks are growing in many parts of Europe.

In dozens of states conservative Governors and their legislators spe-

cifically seek to reduce voting opportunities and other benefits for lower income and lower status people, including many immigrants. They attack college age students, minorities, and many others who for many different reasons have often been marginalized in the society. Other attacks, for example, are on school curriculum and materials, such as removing meaningful discussion of slavery from history textbooks or downgrading evolution and global climate change. Trumpism is taking new forms, including suggesting that our free press media are “enemies of the people.”

The word *Democracy* itself is hard to define simply and carries multiple meanings depending on the user, the listener, and the place of use. For me, Democracy is not a THING or an institution or a political party. It is not a single, coherent ideology like Marxism. Democracy as I think about it is a collection of many practices and ideas and attitudes. It is a way of living together and practicing fairness and social justice. It means respecting the rights and differences of all members of a society, or country, or family or institution. One important consistent practice and value is the opportunity for all people to have some voice in the decisions – large and small – that affect them and their lives. While it is hard to define and to pin down

most of us know when we see it or feel it and we know when it is or is not there.

A key question for me has always been how do public schools in the US and other countries become examples of democratic practices. That they have influence and responsibility is clear. A distinguished American historian Samuel Barber once wrote that public schools are how a society forges a functioning citizenry - how a society turns young, selfish, individuals into conscientious community-minded citizens who see the link between personal interests and the common good.

For a school anyplace in the world to be serious about reforming schools it must be more successful in teaching all students, including those that are often left behind. A school must be serious about learning to practice Democracy and must have laws and policies that make that possible. A former US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis is credited with coining the term “laboratory of democracy” many years ago. Schools everywhere can take at least small steps toward becoming models of what democracy means in action in families, communities, organizations, states, universities, countries, and international groupings as well as in the schools themselves.

And in doing this can become a serious part of the opposition to Trump and his supporters. So, making schools more democratic can be a useful part of opposing Trumpism.

Making schools more democratic can also advance intercultural understanding.

Sometimes in schools and in families and communities it is small steps that are most important on the path to democratic values and practice. An interesting example of what students can study is the current situation in Myanmar (Burma) of Aun Sang Su Shi. She is taking small but meaningful steps and apparently succeeding in moving a military dictatorship in power for decades slowly toward such practices as voting, recognizing political parties, and permitting opposition politicians to run for office. And Portugal has made serious progress toward schools that move to action beyond talk about Democracy.

Democratic schools forge new citizens in three ways – knowledge, direct experiences, and example. The seven categories below suggest some of the small steps (and even some larger ones) toward democracy that schools can help to achieve.

STUDENT VOICE. New ways can be found to give voice to stu-

dents, paths through which they can give opinions, perspectives, and raise questions such as the use of social media and student-organized forums. Traditional student councils are often mostly window-dressing. But there are already examples of how such councils actually are consistent with democratic practice. There could be many more.

COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT. Some school district heads and school principals are now using democratic approaches for collaborative decision-making, evaluation of teachers and other staff, and executing policies. It is too easy to identify examples top-down, sometimes authoritarian administrative the practice. They are sometimes disguised as ways to be more efficient. We need to highlight positive examples as well as to criticize those who do not get it.

BEYOND THE BAKE SALE. All of the types of parent/family involvement in Joyce Epstein's six part typology can be useful and important. (See the website of the National Network of Partnership Schools). But good examples of parent/family participation in decision-making and policy development should be a present in any comprehensive effort to show school contributions to supporting and demonstrating to students and parents useful democratic practices in

action.

ENLIVENED TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HISTORY AND CIVICS. For many decades student ranking and assessment of history and civics courses in schools is dismally low, at or near the bottom. Tests also consistently shown appallingly low student and adult knowledge about these subjects. Innovative and contemporary ways to enliven learning and teaching in these vital areas is badly needed and fortunately examples can be found with a few minutes of googling. A good starting point could be former Justice Sandra Day O'Connors' civic curriculum as a part of efforts to oppose Trumpism.

COMMUNITY SERVICE WITH A BITE. Well developed and supervised community service programs have potential awake or reinforce student interest in democratic practices. Such programs that help students make the connections between their experience and conceptual learning are becoming more popular. Strong local community groups are important to oppose Trump and his ideas.

WELL-FUNCTIONING ORGANIZATIONS. A school to enliven democratic practice needs strong organizations, that themselves seek to use democratic practices in their work. This includes teacher and

staff unions, parent associations and parent councils and multiple kinds of student organizations. There are examples to be found of organizations that are not only effective but use democratic procedures in their own operations.

PRAGMATIC BENEFITS. Well focused ways are needed to help students be more aware of the practical economic, and personal benefits of using and supporting democratic practices in their own lives, families, work, and communities.

I propose here that one way to start oppositions to Trump is to make more real the sometimes abstract concept of Democracy and democratic practices in schools. We need good, current examples of from well-functioning Democratic schools and communities and we need tens of thousands of citizens and educators reviewing the practices of Democracy in their own schools and communities and considering ways to install and strengthen the practices of Democracy in their own schools/ and communities.

I want to emphasize again that small steps on a promising path are just as important as those on a big scale. I encourage interested readers to consider my proposal here: Making schools more Democratic is one good way to oppose Trump and his anti-democratic crusade.

I issue a challenge to those across Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America to think again about Democracy as an idea and a principle for fostering cultural and social diversity. The challenge is to think again about practices in any of the areas suggested in this article that can be modified to be more consistent with Democracy. These practices require attention to cultural, economic, and political justice.

* Please note that readers interest in the ideas offered here can follow up by reading books and articles by Samuel Barber. Joyce Epstein's work with her National Network can be discovered in much of her recent writing. Sandra Day O'Connors' work after she retired from the US Supreme Court has a strong emphasis on Democracy and cultural pluralism.

Ficha curricular

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