

## Democracy at Risk

Deborah Meier

**School's most pressing job is to teach the democratic life.**

Just because ancient Greece was a democracy doesn't mean that just anyone could sit in on Plato's seminars or Socrates' discourses. Or in the early days of America, that just anyone could vote for the U.S.

Constitution. In democracies like these, only a tiny proportion of the population was eligible for full citizenship.

The small elite usually included white males with inherited incomes or members of the so-called "leisured classes." Only the leisured had time for the tough intellectual work—and networking—that democracy rests on. Only males were included because women were presumed not to think well outside of hearth and home. And only whites were represented because people of color were slaves and could hardly have leisure time, not to mention a vote on their own enslavement. Working people who weren't property owners were also not included.

From this societal structure followed certain ideas about schools and education. The 5–10 percent of the population who were privileged to vote were recipients of a special education—different from vocational apprenticeships—that focused on providing the ruling class with the special knowledge that it alone required.

Times have changed. Today, approximately 90 percent of all those 18 years old and older in the United States are eligible to vote. When 90 percent of all adults are presumably rulers, 90 percent should be getting that same "special" education. Or so it seems to me.

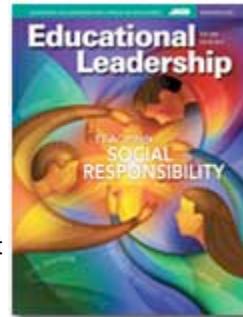
## Schooling for Ruling

When democracy operated directly—more like old-fashioned New England town meetings—and the voters were all members of an esteemed network of adult males who knew one another face-to-face, much education of the elite occurred informally. This elitism in education remains true today. Only 10–20 percent of Americans receive the formal and informal education intended to produce a ruling class. As elite private and public schools boast, "We're here to educate the leaders of the future." They're not so interested in the followers.

Self-governance, so the rhetoric claims, refers to a governing body that is chosen of, by, and for the people. In modern times, although we've changed who "the people" are, we have not changed the road to peoplehood.

That's what schools ought to be doing—schooling for ruling. That's their singular public responsibility. There is no other place in modern life where ordinary people learn the trade of democracy—its particular body of knowledge, its particular skills, its "habits of mind."

Few and far between are the communities in which our young people witness democratic discourse, with its complex set of trade-offs. Seldom do young people see the justice system at work or how juries debate, except in glamorous TV shows. Few have heard of Robert's Rules of Order—unless they served on student governments. Most would find it startling that there are no constitutions governing democracy in many long-standing democracies, such as Great Britain. Most U.S. schoolchildren have been taught that



"the majority wins" is the basic premise of democracy, although our own system breaks that rule over and over again. (Only one of the five central governing institutions in the United States—the House of Representatives—honors majority rule.)

Am I calling for more civics courses, and perhaps more attention to U.S. history? No. We remember about as much from those courses as we do from those in algebra and trigonometry or physics and ancient history. If we're lucky, information sticks with us until the final exam, and then gradually (or for some of us, quickly) it drops out of sight. Unless we are part of a community, club, or profession in which we continually practice such knowledge and skill, they never become habitual.

## Moving Beyond Dependency

We need to create settings in which the young learn democracy firsthand, as we learn most things—by observation and imitation—and then gradually by more formal apprenticeships. This should include time to reflect on practice, read what others have thought, and develop alternative ideas.

Schools are uniquely suited environments for this. Who better than adult, well-educated teachers to practice and, by their example, teach democracy? If we don't trust teachers to make decisions about their own craft, how can we possibly claim to trust ordinary citizens to make decisions about matters far beyond their daily experience or skill? When we deprive teachers of a voice and vote—as we are doing today—we teach a lesson, but perhaps not the one we intended to teach: This hierarchical, top-down world that our young people encounter suggests that democracy is not an appropriate form of governance.

Parents and communities used to have a decisive voice through local school governance, but that was some time ago. When I was born, there were 200,000 school boards for a population one-third the size of the United States today. Now there are fewer than 20,000 school boards, and in the large population centers, these are chosen by the mayor, if they exist at all.

Today, few teachers or parents, let alone young people, are in a position to make authentic choices with real consequences. They often depend on decisions that are made far removed from them in ways they little understand. It's hardly surprising, then, that researchers and college faculty complain about students' lack of initiative in their own education. We've taught students the habits of dependency and compliance, with the apparent alternative being rebellion, not independence and thoughtfulness.

This is reversible. We need to scour the school day for choices that ought to belong to the learner, not just to the teacher, and for choices that ought to belong to the teacher, not just to the principal, school board, or state authorities. As students grow older, they can play apprenticeship roles in the governance of various aspects of school life. The same is true for preservice and new teachers.

## Honing a Democratic Citizenry

Like many other members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, Mission Hill School in Boston, Massachusetts, follows this path from novice to full participating member. The school day is filled with options and strives to increase accountability for the wise use of such powers. Once a week, staff members meet to review any needed decisions—and no decisions are beyond their purview. These include matters as petty as establishing dress codes and revising schedules and as momentous as selecting overarching school themes and hiring teachers and leaders. At these meetings, staff members also present their curriculum plans to their colleagues and discuss breakthrough research.

Students are equally involved in school governance. At the end of 7th grade, students elect representatives to the School Governing Board, which consists of five students, five staff members, five representatives from students' families, and five members of the broader community. The board's most crucial decisions have to do with approving the school budget and selecting and evaluating the principal.

Decisions require the approval of the majority of each of the four constituencies. In addition to this practice of decision making at the wholeschool governing level, all meetings—including staff meetings—are open to everyone, as are the minutes.

Even more important, we have designed all our courses to focus on the habits of mind that we think are most central to an informed and intelligent democratic citizenry, whether it's math, history, literature, science, or the rules that govern us in our hallways. Our five habits of mind include questions that we believe are at the heart of any discussion about policy, and they define a well-educated person:

- *Evidence*: How do we know what we know, and what's the evidence?
- *Viewpoint*: Could there be another point of view?
- *Connections/Cause and Effect*: Do you see any patterns? Has this happened before? What are the possible consequences?
- *Conjecture*: Could it have been otherwise? If even just one thing had happened differently, what might have changed?
- *Relevance*: Does it matter? Who cares?

Students need sufficient time in class to ponder such questions. For example, in our physics courses, instead of trying to cram all of physics into students' heads in a single year, we instead take a few central ideas and spend two years on them. Given this time frame, it becomes sensible to ask students to explore the controversies that these ideas produced in the setting in which they were discovered—as well as the ideas they replaced.

These five mental habits are not "taught" or memorized. But both teachers and students practice them over and over as we study our subject matter and live and work together. For example, when our faculty members select professional development, they must demonstrate to one another how the subject matter fits such habits. When students graduate, they must present evidence of such habits in all their work, showing that they are aware of other viewpoints and arguments and that they are resting theirs on evidence considered valid in the field. And when faculty members present their proposed curriculum to their colleagues, they must show that students will have ample opportunity to read and learn about different viewpoints, have access to a wide range of evidence, and be called on to look for patterns and make conjectures.

There are habits of work and heart, too, on which decisions rest regarding who "belongs," who gets left out, and what rules to honor most. When someone is hurt, for example, are we more concerned with punishing the wrongdoer or with helping the wronged?

And we talk, talk, talk. As adults, we share with students the way we negotiate the world, in more detail as they become closer to adulthood themselves. The school's central shared space—our "office"—is open to all; there, students may hear me arguing with someone from the central office or overhear collegial discussions. Instead of endlessly reminding students about how best to handle the mistakes they inevitably make, we often use ourselves as examples—how, for instance, I dealt with the police officer who stopped me for speeding and why what works for me might not work for them. We avoid saying things like, "It's not my decision" and "I had no choice." We look for opportunities to say, "Yes, we decided that." We want kids to become accustomed to taking responsibility for their choices, so we try to model that attitude as adults.

Our family conferences include the student—and we do not try to avoid disagreements in those conferences. Our aim is to reach agreement even if it takes time, even if it means more meetings. It's an attempt to use democratic-style thinking to live by. But above all, it's just a stab at doing what few of us have had an opportunity to experience before—being full members of an important membership-based

community.

## Living Democracy

Schools can foster these habits by teaching both basic academic subjects and specialized classes—like our schoolwide course on the electoral system—in ways that get to the heart of specific democratic dilemmas. Schools can teach these habits by the way they organize themselves into classrooms and structure school governance—and by the way they teach all members how to deal with restrictions that are beyond our control. When I am "caught" breaking a rule—for example, when a police officer motions me over for speeding—I share with my students my dilemma: I didn't make that rule, but I am responsible for how I handle having broken it.

Democracy is embedded in the work of living in a socially shared space, and it becomes a habit as we go back and forth between living it and studying it, over and over, and then passing on our accumulated wisdom to the young.

Democracy, as Winston Churchill reminded us, is a flawed and at times absurd idea, until one considers the far more flawed alternatives. From the viewpoint of students, most of life *is* that flawed alternative. For many students, schools are the only place where they might come to grips with why democracy may not be quite so absurd.

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