

What is Democratic Education?

Written in 2007 for a proposed book on democratic schools

Nearly everyone in the Western world believes in democracy, right? So why would anyone question the need for schools to be “democratic”? Indeed, why are most schools in our culture manifestly nondemocratic? The alternative educators represented in this volume, who pointedly call their schools “democratic,” often portray their model as based on simple common sense, or at least as a simple extension of America’s founding principles—but in many ways their ideas are thoroughly radical, and run counter to certain beliefs and traditions in modern society. One reason for this confusion is that there are different ways to understand the meaning of democracy.

The democratic schools considered here are based upon a notion of genuine participatory democracy, practiced everywhere throughout society, with all ages of people. The term “participatory democracy” was used by the New Left in the 1960s (e.g. the Port Huron Statement of 1962) as a way of reclaiming the essence of democratic idealism in a society they believed had grown over-organized, hierarchical and authoritarian. It is the antidote to technocracy (rule by experts, bureaucrats and administrators) and represents a renewed faith in the intelligence and moral judgment of common citizens pursuing their daily lives and interests. John Dewey, the premier philosopher of democracy and progressive education, argued that “all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them.”¹

According to the proponents of democratic education, young people ought to have this same power (and responsibility) in the schools where they spend so much of their lives. When individuals are bound by limitations, expectations or rules they had no part in establishing, then they cannot be said to live in a democratic environment; therefore, in this view, schools that are entirely managed by adults (teachers, administrators, school boards, and ultimately state and federal government officials) do not teach democracy, and do not enable young people to experience or practice meaningful participation in the social institution with which they are most intimately involved.

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This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net

This version of democratic education reflects a radical educational critique that blossomed in the mid-1960s in the wake of the New Left's rebellion on college campuses and the civil rights movement.² Thousands of students and many young educators began to explore the relevance of "freedom" and "democracy" to education; they discovered A.S. Neill's fiery manifesto of educational liberation, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Childrearing*, which had been published in 1960, and soon became inspired as well by the educational writings of John Holt, Paul Goodman, George Dennison, Jonathan Kozol, Herbert Kohl and others. The dissidents fled the public school system and established as many as 1000 "free schools" across the U.S.

Free school ideology, like the broader protest movements to which it was related, sought to liberate the individual from the restraints of a society viewed as oppressive and technocratic. Learning was viewed as a natural part of growing up, not requiring adult interference. These educators expressed a deep trust in the human organism and a great deal of mistrust in the institutions of society. This identified them as radicals, even as countercultural activists like the anti-war protesters and hippies. However, one school established during this time, Sudbury Valley in Massachusetts, began publishing a series of writings arguing that their educational approach actually embodied the American principles of democracy more authentically than did the established school system. Democratic schools were needed because public schooling had betrayed the ideals of the American Revolution. In the minds of many dissident educators, free schools were as American as apple pie.

Although most of the free schools disappeared by the mid-1970s, when the political and educational establishment launched a conservative counterattack, their ideas continued to circulate among the remaining alternative schools and the emerging homeschooling movement. Then, a resurgence began. The first annual International Democratic Education Conference was held in 1993, and over thirty "Sudbury schools" have been established in the past several years. Thousands of parents are "unschooling" their children. New books are being published on freedom in learning, and the old classics are being revived (see www.educationrevolution.org/democratic.html).

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Nevertheless, the vast majority of educators, policymakers, and even parents do not accept this educational philosophy. They see the ideology of participatory democracy, especially when practiced in schools, as dangerously radical. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, let's say that there are two basic orientations, each claiming to speak on behalf of freedom and democracy, that oppose the core ideals of "democratic education," for very different reasons. One is republican (conservative); the other is the social democratic (progressive) ideology.

A defining feature of conservative political and social thought is its mistrust of pure democracy. Most of the American founding fathers—certainly those who wrote the Constitution—were not democrats, they were republicans. This means that they saw government as acting in the public interest, not because the masses could demand whatever they wanted, but because society's more established, more enlightened members would rationally deliberate on public affairs on their behalf. There are economic, political, and deeply rooted religious reasons why modern society is essentially conservative and elitist. Untamed human impulses are not trusted. If children are not schooled in the rules of capitalism, republican citizenship, and morality, there would be anarchy, leveling (an attack on private property), and social upheaval. According to this view, there can be no real freedom amid such chaos. An orderly, stable system guarantees legal rights, property rights, and public morality, thereby allowing democratic processes (i.e. voting) to take place.

In mainstream politics, conservatism is opposed by a progressive or "liberal" agenda which is substantially more democratic. But progressives are strong supporters of public education and will probably not be rallying around "democratic schools" any time soon. Why not? Because they are *social* democrats. Ironically, the social democratic position is closely aligned with Dewey's philosophy, and here's the catch: although Dewey certainly valued individuality and personal freedom, he argued forcefully that the problems of modern capitalism grow out of an *excessive* individualism which fails to appreciate the collaborative aspects of democracy, the importance of a sense of social responsibility. Dewey criticized the "child-centered" educators of the 1920s who called themselves "progressive" and considered themselves his followers, and he joined with the

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This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net “social reconstructionist” progressives who organized at Teachers College after the Depression revealed to them the ugly shadow of competitive individualism. Repeating this pattern at the height of the free school movement, some radicals—particularly Kozol and Kohl—began to question the Neillian child-centered faith and demanded that democratic schools join a more collaborative and engaged political movement to address the injustices and inequalities of society.

Progressives point to several reasons why they believe that a personalized model of participatory democracy is not adequate for maintaining a democratic culture. David Sehr, Robert Westbrook and other Deweyan scholars argue that under individualistic capitalism, democracy has come to mean the right to be left alone, and this diminishes participation in public affairs. People consider themselves consumers rather than citizens, and participation in politics is limited to voting for candidates. This is a “privatized” democracy, and we see its fruits in the policies of Reagan and Bush. Amy Gutmann (currently the president of the University of Pennsylvania), wrote an important book during the Reagan administration, titled *Democratic Education*, in which she argued that privatized schooling does not give citizens with different points of view the opportunity to negotiate about what common societal goals they seek to achieve through education. Progressives are concerned that the absence of public dialogue, common goals, and social responsibility leads to a fragmented, selfish society administered by self-appointed elites—pretty much what we have now.

Another argument, expressed by the influential progressive political scientist Benjamin Barber, is that democracy is not a naturally occurring form of society but requires training and hard work to attain. Specifically, in this view, a “democratic school” is *not* one that treats children as if they were already responsible adults, but one that deliberately teaches them important things they do not know about the world, so that they can more intelligently engage in collaborative problem solving and be prepared to exercise a mature sense of social responsibility. As Dewey himself put it in *Experience and Education* (his critique of child-centered education), “Guidance given by the teacher to the exercise of the pupils’ intelligence is an aid to freedom, not a restriction upon it.”³

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The reason I bring up these objections is not to criticize the idealism of participatory democracy, but to place the democratic school movement in historical and cultural context. Society as a whole is not yet prepared for so much democracy. But perhaps, if the movement continues to expand, it will demonstrate on an ever wider scale that young people *can* be trusted with more freedom and more responsibility than they are allowed in the vast majority of schools, and that the result of such freedom is neither social and moral chaos (as conservatives fear) nor isolated self-interest (as progressives claim). The people in democratic schools report that children are capable of remarkable intelligence, compassion, maturity, collaborative problem solving, and social responsibility when given a chance. What kind of adults do these children become? Do they tend to be engaged citizens or unquestioning consumers? Do they need wiser people to govern and instruct them, or are they more resourceful than our cultural prejudices imagine it possible for them to be?

Freedom is ultimately the opportunity to experiment, and democracy is ultimately the cultural flexibility to admit when experiments turn out successfully. It can be reasonably argued that the system of mass public schooling, standardized and administered from high above, is an unsuccessful experiment in many ways. Why not try another?

1. Joseph Ratner, ed., *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy*. New York: Modern Library, 1939, pp. 400-401. Tom Hayden, the primary author of the Port Huron Statement, acknowledged the influence of Dewey's democratic vision.
2. I describe the historical context of this movement in my book *Free Schools, Free People: Education and Democracy After the 1960s* (Albany: SUNY press, 2002).
3. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938) New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1963, p. 71.