

# EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

By Dr. Judy Minier

Educational Consultant to American University in Kyrgyzstan  
Faculty Member, Anglo-American Studies Department, AUK

## **Introduction**

“In spite of increased educational attainment and media coverage, the public still knows little about the structure of government, basic political and economic concepts, and major political events and issues”, comments Lawrence Stedman (1995) about the state of affairs in America. He is pointing out the critical need for educators to become the staunchest advocates for *educating* its citizens with the necessary tools to function and to participate fully in a democratic society. For the past 10 years I have worked in many diverse educational settings in the United States, which maintained as their primary agenda, the need to make universities and schools more responsible for helping young people understand the moral and ethical responsibilities of living in a social and political democracy.

It has been extremely important and gratifying work and has become a calling I urgently request my colleagues to join.

There is such irony in Stedman’s statement because so much of the world is now taking unprecedented steps toward becoming “democratic”. Elections are being held regularly (and often more fairly) in nations all around the globe. It is nearly impossible to pick up a newspaper and not find at least one major article discussing which candidates are running for office in various countries, or what the latest campaign issues are all about, or what is at stake in an upcoming election. The entire world is buzzing with a greater sense of awareness about what a “government of the people, by the people and for the people” is all about. But, can democracy be expected to “just happen”, even when it appears that all political conditions are in place? Or conversely, when a democracy has the opportunity to emerge in a given country, does its popula-

tion understand how to shoulder its responsibilities in such a form of government? It is my contention that democracy does not happen by chance and when it does occur it must be taught directly to people in order to survive. Education needs democracy and democratic politics needs education.

While it may be self evident that education and democracy are two sides of the same coin, most educational institutions (including schools, colleges and universities) only pay superficial attention to the relationship between politics and education. This essay briefly explores several key issues around what education and democracy mean to each other as the (more democratic) world enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It grapples with several fundamental questions:

- Can a nation or society claim to have a real democracy without real education?
- Is it possible for a culture or society to have real education without real democracy?
- What does “real” democracy mean?
- What is “real” education?

It is my intention to raise awareness about the essential and symbiotic relationship between democracy and education and between education and politics and what is “needed to build common commitments to a pluralistic democratic community”, (Butts, 1980, 1988).

## **Democracy and Human Development**

Are human beings born “democratic”? There is certainly room to debate this issue, but also considerable evidence exists to suggest that human beings do not come into the world with an inherent predisposition toward any particular

form of organization for a culture or society. There is little evidence to suggest that humans automatically gravitate toward creating, fostering, and living in a democratic environment. In fact, one can look at the long history of the world and see far more examples of feudalism, colonialism, dictatorships, monarchies, and khanates, than models of elected, representative forms of governance, i.e., democracies.

Human babies grow through recognized stages of physical and mental development, but with little attention paid to how they grow up in relation to the form of government they are under. For up to two decades or longer, children rely on the adults around them to provide everything – sustenance, physical and emotional nurturance, and psychological/social guidance. Thus children gain their world views most often through their families and parents and somewhat less so through institutions such as schools, church, youth organizations, and the mass media. (An entirely different and lengthy article could be written about the media's influence on young people, but for the moment, I let this stand as it is.) One assumes that children gain a basic knowledge (and trust or mistrust) of their leaders, the police, the legal system, or the military based upon perceptions which are first shared in the home and only later based upon first hand experiences. It is my contention that schools have an obligation, an imperative, to share and teach information about life in a political and social democracy. Education in this area is sorely lacking based upon what educators traditionally know and value about children's development.

Human growth and development experts recognize that children and youth do experience many well-documented stages such as the following:

- Stages of cognitive development (Jean Piaget, Swiss psychologist)
- Stages of moral development (Lawrence Kohlberg, Harvard educator)
- Stages and phases of physical and emotional development and maturation (David Elkind, Tufts University and many others)
- Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs

- Ethical and intellectual development of young adults (William Perry, Harvard educator)

One quickly notes that, while some of these are tangentially associated with the idea of helping youth to participate in a democratic society, it becomes clear that educators have no easy referent for helping children grow and learn about democracy. While the family bears responsibility to nurture children “democratically”, it is becoming more evident to me that schools have a critically important job in teaching democracy within in their curricula and educational practices. It is worth noting that schools take into account previously mentioned stages of human development, but do not treat seriously the notion of teaching people to live, participate, and continue to create a more equitable, socially-responsible democratic society.

### **What is Education's Responsibility in a Democracy?**

Schools are clearly used and indeed needed, for the amalgamation of society – we need to mesh our views of what kind of a society we want to have. There is no other entity charged with the responsibility of bringing a society's youth into the fold or helping people to understand that democratic government and its requisite politics are a necessary “good” not a necessary “evil”. Dewey (1916) observed that, in a democracy, the purpose for the school is to provide an enlarging experience that transcends the parochial lines of the home and of the community. If one believes that the school has a role to play in the construction of the society, the school needs to have a prototype. Given the increasingly multicultural and diverse populations and the conflicts which arise from within such diversity, there is a need to “rethink schools” (Levine 1995).

Historically speaking, and at the risk of being a bit oversimplistic, one primary purpose (i.e., prototype) of education for many decades in America was to provide workers for industrial factories and to create soldiers who obediently followed orders for the military. This concept is sometimes referred to as education for the military-industrial complex and it applies to many

countries (even America) in varying degrees today. This type of education is not inherently good or bad – in fact, it was a model which fit its time in America’s history quite well. Because most workers did have jobs in factories, they needed to be able to do repetitious work for long hours. Schools modeled this aspect by adopting curricula which relied on repetitive workbooks and worksheets for children to do.

Teachers were very authoritarian in schools and provided all the information to children because they acted as benevolent autocrats so that children would learn to respect authority and do as they were told.

There are other indicators or evidence that schooling still has vestiges of the military-industrial model to some extent. Students are still expected to memorize parcels of information, even useless information that can in fact be quite readily “looked up” if ever needed. Students are expected to regurgitate memorized information on tests and are not required to *apply* that information in useful or open-ended problem solving ways. Students of all ages are seated in rows in a classroom because it models factory efficiency. Children are lined up to walk to places because it teaches obedience to authority. Schools continue to use conventions like age=grade level, even though it has been shown that multi-age mixes of students are far more advantageous and normal to learning situations. Schools use competition as the primary means of motivation, even though businesses in the “information age” are clamoring for people (workers) who can cooperate and collaborate among groups. (For further discussion of these archaic and other related historical issues, see David Tyack’s book, *The One Best System*.)

Now with the passing from the industrial age to the information age, things have necessarily begun to change in educational practice in America, which will more positively influence the schools’ role in teaching about democracy. Students need more than facts. They need to understand the relationships between “facts” and whose interests certain “facts” serve. They need to question the validity of the “facts”, to ask

questions such as “why” and “how.”

They need to know how to find information to solve problems, to express themselves in oral and written language so their opinions can be shared with, and have an influence on, broader society. It is only through such an approach that students can construct their own beliefs, their own knowledge, and make their own contribution in an increasingly complex and multicultural world.

This constructivist view of education has begun to change the ways teachers are prepared and the ways that schools function. In an era when information doubles every few years, it is no longer possible for teachers to teach everything their students must know in the span of 12 years of formal public education, or in a semester long university course. Teachers can no longer be the authority or fountain of all wisdom. Indeed, many students far outdistance their teachers’ knowledge on many topics. Additionally, education is not just a one way street from teacher to learner. We are no longer in a “transmission of knowledge” mode to a new generation of learners, but rather in a time for two-way interactions: students learning from teachers and teachers learning from students and all learning from more “real world” problems to solve in the curricula.

### **What Should Be Democracy’s Commitment to Education?**

John Goodlad suggests that there are moral dimensions to “schooling” in a democratic society and essential conditions which must exist if democracies are to survive and thrive. Schools must have a commitment from political sources to be allowed to conduct free inquiry and an open-ended curriculum in order to best educate a nation’s population.

A school or university system should be free from unnecessary red tape, censorship, control from above, and be adequately supplied and funded to do the job that must be done. Real education, not just “schooling”, includes the following precepts, and ensures that real democracy can continue to flourish.

- *Enculturating the young into a social and political democracy*

Schools' curricula must explicitly address issues around democratic practices: what is working; what is not; and, how our system can be changed or improved. Presently some schools will have units of instruction about elections, how the Congress works, what a president does, etc., but these are all superficial treatments of what Goodlad means by enculturation. He suggests that schools should be operated more democratically, that students and educators should be able to practice democratic activities and be involved in decision-making about what affects the school and the community outside the school. In other words, students should have consistent and regular experiences related to involvement in issues they can relate to. These should not be "pretend" issues as created by educators, but issues the students have initiated and thus have an interest in.

Here is an example of what is meant. In one school I am acquainted with, children expressed concern about heavy traffic near the corner of the playground. Through discussions with their teacher, it was determined that a stop sign or traffic light would help make the area safer as children came to school. Over a several month period, the children wrote letters to the city council, met with officials of traffic control department, discussed issues with the city planner, and eventually helped to have a stop sign erected. This is not a pretend unit of instruction, but rather a real situation the children could relate to and an activity representing civic involvement in the society around the students. It was a powerful lesson in participatory democracy.

Universities also have an obligation to provide similar opportunities to students to become involved in issues with a broader social and political significance such as Amnesty International, Student Government, and crisis hotlines, etc. In a more ideal world, each university course, whether English composition, or Biology 101 would have a civic aspect to it with students required to carry out an activity which would have broad societal implications to it. Democracy in educa-

tion goes well beyond activities which occur in civics classes, government or political science classes.

- *Providing access to knowledge for all children and youth*

This is an issue of equity and parity among learners. "Providing access" can be misunderstood, because at first glance in American schools, it may appear that already that equal treatment for all students generally exists, because many classrooms look similar. However, this moral dimension of schooling goes well beyond providing adequate resources, books, equipment, and materials to all students. It also means that there should be a level playing field for students. For example, there are students today who utilize the Internet to complete their homework assignments by corresponding with top scientists to get the latest insights on research that is currently being conducted. In the same class, another student relies on an outdated 1962 *World Book* encyclopedia for information for the same assignment. Both are competing for grades in the class, for a place in a good university or the world of work, yet each are really being graded on "access" issues which are beyond the students' control, not their ability to write or think or do research.

The politicians (legislatures, congresses, state departments of education, ministers of education) must ensure that proper resources are provided to the education enterprise, without bias. Proper resources include a strong, well-paid teaching staff who meet licensing criteria, adequate school facilities, appropriate class sizes, adequate materials for teaching and learning, all at low or no cost to the students or parents. Appropriate and transparent collection of funding must be achieved by the government to provide the necessary resources to operate all schools.

America's great experiment is that schools were established to provide education to all its' citizens. America's public education system provides schools that are free of cost and open to all students. Students with learning difficulties or handicapping conditions are given free, appropri-

ate public education along side those students who do not have such conditions.

- *Ensuring the responsible stewardship of schools*

This dimension implies that educators have a role in society larger than dispensing knowledge and information. Educators must also pursue their roles as stewards of educational renewal and best practices, in the sense that we have something precious to conserve, i.e., our learners, who represent the future of and for us all.

Educators serve as caregivers to young people as well as content and discipline based teachers, and as such must stay current in educational research and practice. School and university personnel must continue to know and understand what learning and cognitive development means.

Educators must strengthen good teaching strategies and use research, inquiry and critical thinking to become leaders of the educational community and change agents in educational settings and beyond. Being responsible stewards of the schools also ensures that *all* students will be educated, not just the best or brightest or wealthiest.

- *Practicing nurturing pedagogy*  
(*the art and the science of teaching and learning*)

Educators in schools take into account the previously mentioned stages of human development, but not the notion of teaching all young people to live, participate, and continue to create a more equitable, socially-responsible society. Pedagogical nurturing means that teachers are free to use any and all appropriate modes of instruction to help the learners reach their potential as educated, thinking citizens. This also means that teachers model respect for individual differences and appreciation of the basic worth of each individual.

Educators must plan instruction and assessment with sensitivity to issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and to foster an appreciation of diversity among students and co-workers. Pedagogy should be nurturing to the learner regardless of the background or experience the learner brings to class.

Nurturing pedagogy best occurs in classes that are not too large.

What is needed then, in order to have real education in an information age and for real democracy to flourish? What must be in place for real democracy to be fostered by the appropriate educational system? I suggest the following actions are essential to ensuring democracy and education within a society:

- Nurture critical thinking and critical analysis skills in all learners
- Promote application and problem solving skills
- Ensure that a social conscience is developed
- Explore ways to create new information, not just learn the old
- Model democratic practices in classrooms
- Emphasize creativity and “thinking outside the box”
- Enhance decision-making abilities and the ability to change your mind when you acquire better data
- Foster individual responsibility but promote and provide group support (via cooperative learning strategies)
- Utilize a variety of curricula and materials and use them in different ways
- Create and promote active, reflective learning experiences for learners

## Concluding Comments

Practicing democratic ideals and ensuring democratic fairness seem to be principles that are learned. Democracy encourages and allows for divergent thinking, minority positions, free speech, and diversity of opinions. It permits minority opinions and gives minorities the task of convincing the majority to adopt new ideas, laws, and ideals. Democracy is not consensus or coercion; humans must learn to break away from (even or especially those “benevolent”) dictators and dictatorships perhaps including teachers (Holt, 1995).

Some political analysts believe we are in a time of “emerging democracies” that no single country has yet fully “arrived” as truly democratic. All of us aspiring toward more democratic societies are in different places along that imagi-

nary continuum. I believe the one sure thing, wherever we are in that process, is that education will be the key to providing long-term well-being to all citizens of the democracy.

### Reference List

- Butts, R. F. (1980). "The Revival of Civic Learning", *Phi Delta Kappan*, pp. 42-44.
- Butts, R. F. (1988). *The Morality of Democratic Citizenship*. Center for Civic Education, Calabasas, CA.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*, New York: The Free Press.
- Goodlad, J. I. (1990). *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools*, San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Goodlad, J. I. (1994). *Educational Renewal*, San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Holt, J. (Revised 1995). *How Children Learn*, Perseus Publishing, USA.
- Levine, D., Lowe R , Peterson, B., and Tenorio, R. eds. (1995). *Rethinking Schools: An Agenda for Change*, New York, The New Press.
- Stedman, L. (February 1995). "The New Mythology About the Status of U.S. Schools", *Educational Leadership*, pp 80-85.
- Tyack, David. (1974) *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*, Harvard University Press, USA.

