

The characteristics of the school as a democratic institution

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Abstract

Schools should be viewed not only as institutions that impart certain knowledge and skills to students, but also as environments that socialize them. Education should be seen as a democratizing force that helps to prepare students to participate actively in all aspects of democratic life. As John Dewey (in Koliba, 2000) postulates, the aims of education should be oriented towards preparing young people to be full and active participants in all aspects of democratic life. The skills and dispositions needed to actively participate in all aspects of democratic life include: the ability to think critically, a sense of efficacy, a commitment to compassionate action, and a desire to actively participate in political life by engaging in local decision-making processes, lobbying, voting and many others, as well as the basic need to be able to read, write and do arithmetic or mathematical calculations. In a sense, schools that best teach students the skills to participate actively in democracy are themselves institutions that reflect democratic principles not only in word, but also in deed.

Keywords: democratic, school, institution, characteristics, decision-making, students

1. Introduction

Schools should be viewed not only as institutions that impart certain knowledge and skills to students, but also as environments that socialize them. Education should be seen as a democratizing force that helps to prepare students to participate actively in all aspects of democratic life. As John Dewey (in Koliba, 2000) ^[3] postulates, the aims of education should be oriented towards preparing young people to be full and active participants in all aspects of democratic life. The skills and dispositions needed to actively participate in all aspects of democratic life include: the ability to think critically, a sense of efficacy, a commitment to compassionate action, and a desire to actively participate in political life by engaging in local decision-making processes, lobbying, voting and many others, as well as the basic need to be able to read, write and do arithmetic or mathematical calculations. In a sense, schools that best teach students the skills to participate actively in democracy are themselves institutions that reflect democratic principles not only in word, but also in deed.

2. The school must be a living, dynamic, democratic community in miniature

It is self-evident that a child can only be educated for social adulthood and, with that, for good citizenship, in and through the life of the community. This means that if the school seeks to educate for democracy, it should not be the only or chiefly a collection of individuals or an authoritarian state in miniature, but should itself constitute a living, dynamic, democratic community in miniature.

The school should be regarded as the bridge between the home and the society. The school may not be an isolated miniature community but should be in lively contact with the home on the one hand and society on the other. Ideally, it should be a macrocosm of the home and a microcosm of society.

Teachers should try to win the interest, confidence and co-operation of the community as a whole by taking interest in, and when possible, partaking and taking the lead in the projects and activities of the local community. It would be better still if the school could participate as a school in the socio-cultural activities of society. For in a democratic society the school really belongs to the people, and, therefore, it functions as the educational partner of the home (or family) in service of the community.

In such a school the child is given the opportunity in and through the life of the school in its entirety to develop social interests of his group or society as a whole above his own immediate interests and not only to seek to receive but also to give and to enjoy doing so.

3. It provides for freedom of the individual

It is stated above that the school, as the educational partner of the home, is a social institution and, as such, serves the community. This however does not mean that in a democratic community the school is the slave of community. On the contrary, in a democracy the school is clearly recognized as an autonomous institution, sovereign in its own sphere, which, as such is governed above all by pedagogical demands. Therefore, if the demands of society at large or of a group within society should clash with pedagogical demands, the school cannot comply with the former.

In order to educate its pupils successfully for a democratic way of life, the school can obviously not be totalitarian state in miniature, but should itself constitute a good miniature democracy having as its basis the freedom of the individual, but freedom within limits for the individual person as a being-in-community. As a good educational institution the good democratic school cannot pursue any goal other than the gradual society. It seeks to assist support and guide its pupils both outside and inside the classroom, in and by means of all its work and activities, to attain true democracy and freedom as a self-reliant or self-dependent existence.

Children are however not left over to themselves. When they are young and immature they are under the supervision of the teacher or an adult who must not bully, domineer or rule them but must guide support and lead. Thus sympathetic and meaningful discipline must be exercised. Through this the children learn to respect and accept obedience to authority which is an essential virtue in a democratic society.

In a democratic society freedom and authority are equal and must thus be carried through to the school.

4. Equality

Equality after freedom is the second corner-stone for a school where democracy is practiced. Freedom means that there is no discrimination among pupils on the grounds of birth, social status, intellectual abilities or material possessions. Every child has the right to education.

It is the responsibility of the school to as a democratic body to provide both individualization and differentiation in its teaching to provide equal opportunity for all pupils (Gumbo, 2013) ^[1]. Since all persons are equal in dignity, the democratic school seeks to make provision in the sense of suitable and adequate opportunities for everyone, thus differentiated opportunities and not identical or the same opportunities because children are qualitatively unequal in respect of their innate talents, and disposition.

As Madziyire (2010) ^[2] postulates, good democratic school thus is a child-centered school that carries the true interest of every pupil at heart. Thus creating a self-thinking, self-reliant, capable and responsible citizen in a democratic society.

5. Cultivation of leaders

A school which seeks to educate its pupils for the democracy, is specially concerned to cultivate leaders. This necessitates that in respect of its subject teaching and other activities, its entire organization, discipline, human relations, teaching methods and its spirit and atmosphere, the school shall be such that pupils enjoy sufficient opportunity in and out of the classroom for self-activity in various forms, including a form of strictly self-government; that their initiative is stimulated and they are given the opportunity and are inspired to exercise leadership. Thus a good democratic school is in its entire structure such that those pupils, who have any potential for it at all, are inspired and activated to become leaders (Moyo, 2014) ^[4]. This also means that, although no child is neglected, and the less gifted majority are not sacrificed for the sake of the gifted minority, the school does all in its power to discover its gifted pupils and potential leaders and to do them justice by giving them special attention.

6. The school is a living unity-in-diversity

Since the doors to democratic school are open to all, the school constitutes a living unity-in-diversity, which is characterized by a community of values and goals, intelligent co-operation, a feeling of belonging together and free intellectual interaction. Viewed from a socio-democratic perspective as well as on the basis of pedagogical principles, there is nothing wrong with this; it is desirable that boys and girls, the gifted and the less gifted, as well as pupils taking different courses should be taught in the same school. In schools like this pupils have the opportunity for communicating and doing things together, constituting pupils

the daily experience the art of living as individuals-in-community.

7. Provides teaching that inspires

A school which seeks to educate or help to educate its pupils to become good citizens in a democratic community and state, distinguishes itself by its thorough, challenging illuminating and inspiring teaching and by the teachers, who show them the way in this regard and set a good example of its teachers, who show them the way in this regard and set a good example.

The end goal which the good democratic school tirelessly pursues for democracy is the education of its pupils to become competent, intelligent, self-thinking, self-reliant, self-disciplined, free, responsible and useful citizens in a free society.

8. Conclusion

Studies show that educational environments engaging young people as active participants in their own learning are linked with higher student attendance and student achievement. Moreover, recent brain and cognitive research points to the value of the democratic education learning environment, including key elements such as collaborative projects, age mixing, learning through active experiences and the importance of a caring community. Yet democratic education is important not only for the benefit to the young people who experience such a learning environment. Democratic education also carries the potential for a broader societal impact, as the self-determined individuals and caring individuals who experience democratic education will be the leaders in building a more democratic, vibrant and just society.

9. References

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