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HOMework FOR SCHOOLS: *THE DEMOCRATIC ASSIGNMENT*

*Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research
(ECER) in Geneva 11-16 September, 2006.*

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ABSTRACT

America's foremost educational philosopher, John Dewey, addressed the question "Why do schools exist" in his seminal work "Democracy and Education". The title of his book reveals his answer to that question for societies "nominally democratic" but his excellent argument takes this answer from the realm of the prerogative to what seems to us to be its social imperative. Dewey sees education as a necessity of social life. "Without this communication of ideas, hopes, expectations, standards, opinions, from those members of society who are passing out of the group life to those who are coming into it, social life could not survive" (Dewey, 1996/1916, p. 3).

Most of the education writers who have addressed the broad purposes for schooling have arrived with Dewey at the conclusion that "...democracy is the most important among all the possible philosophical and political sources from which public school purpose can be derived" (Raywid, Tesconi & Warren, 1987, p. 16). We are persuaded that the term democracy – though subject to varied definitions and perceptions – best embodies the collected concepts, beliefs, and values of modern western culture that should comprise the processes and content of compulsory public schooling. We wonder, however, how much of the imperative of schooling for democracy actually resides in the conscious deliberations and intentional activities of educational practitioners.

We are currently in the formative stages of an international research collaboration designed to observe schools in a number of European and North American communities to inquire into the perceived purposes and the actual practices of these schools in relation to democracy. We are interested in the convergence of the democratic intention and the practice of democracy in schools – society's most important institution for social transmission. We have been encouraged by the Swedish curriculum for the compulsory school in which democratic assignment is a national objective. This goal embraces the importance of the practice of democracy in schools and classrooms and we think it encourages Swedish schools (municipalities are responsible for schools in Sweden) to go beyond teaching about democracy to become institutions of a fully participatory nature. We think this democratic assignment is crucially important to increased realization of participatory democracy in centuries old political democracies of North America and Western Europe and vital to the transition of former eastern bloc countries.

Our research project is conceived as a qualitative inquiry into the perceptions of educators (principally school leaders, classroom teachers and teacher students) relative to the ideals of the democratic assignment.

We will use both survey and interview methodologies in uncovering perceptions. In addition, we will use participant observation strategies in selected schools and classrooms to explore the application of stated principles to observed practices in schools and classrooms. We hope to conduct our research in several compulsory schools in different communities in each of the participating countries (United States, France, Sweden, United Kingdom and maybe also the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Romania).

Our intention is not to draw generalizable conclusions about schools or school systems in participating countries, but rather to better understand the relationship between intention and practice in selected environments. We hope our research will enable educators to look at their own schools in light of the democratic assignment in an effort to improve practices leading to more democratic schools and eventually more democratic, just, and peaceful societies.

INTRODUCTION

Why do schools exist? This question seems so simple and direct that one might expect its answer to be equally plain and clear. One might reply that schools exist to educate the young. Though true enough as a response this answer lacks meaning begging other important questions. What does it mean to educate? For what or in what do the young need to be educated? What is a school and why is it the school's role to educate the young? It soon becomes clear that the question "Why do schools exist?" is both a philosophical and a practical question. It is our belief that this question is too often neglected particularly in its practical applications leaving schools vulnerable to haphazard or calculated misdirection. We believe that the purpose for schooling can be and must be specified so that schools communities can focus their actions on the pursuit of the imperatives of education.

Social Transmission

America's foremost educational philosopher, John Dewey, addressed the question "Why do schools exist?" in his seminal work "Democracy and Education". The title of his book reveals his answer to that question for societies "nominally democratic" but his excellent argument takes this answer from the realm of the prerogative to what seems to us to be its social imperative. Dewey sees education as a necessity of social life. Just as procreation is a necessity for the continuation of all forms of physical life education is necessary for the continuation of social groups. "Without this communication of ideals, hopes, expectations, standards, opinions, from those members of society who are passing out of the group life to those who are coming into it, social life could not survive" (Dewey, 1996/1916, p. 3). In modern times the social groups responsible for communicating with its new members can be fittingly called communities. Whether large or small – nations, provinces, states, cities, towns, villages or tribes – these communities must have an identity. This social identity can be referred to as the community's culture. As communities grew from extended families (tribes) toward nation states, schools were established as formal institutions of social transmission. If we follow the logic of Dewey's argument, communities and schools whose members understand the necessity of social transmission and embrace a common and specified culture will be better able to generate educative experiences for younger members of the community.

The Democratic Assignment

Many of the education writers who have addressed the broad purposes for schooling have arrived with Dewey at the conclusion that "... democracy is the most important among all the possible philosophical and political sources from which public school purpose can be derived" (Raywid, Tesconi & Warren, 1987, p. 16). We are persuaded with our educational colleagues that the term democracy – though subject to varied definitions and perceptions – best embodies the collected concepts, beliefs, and values of modern western culture that should comprise the processes and content of compulsory public schooling. We wonder, however, how much of the imperative of schooling for democracy actually resides in the conscious deliberations and intentional activities of educational practitioners. It has been our individual and collected experience that the topic of ultimate purpose for education is seldom discussed in schools within a context of practical and meaningful application. We have all experienced the discussion and publication of broad goals or mission statements that often contain language about preparation for citizenship or becoming "productive" members of society. But infrequently have we witnessed a commitment to democratic processes within schools and classrooms or a comprehensive school curriculum focused on promoting essential democratic principles.

We define democracy not in terms of political process but rather in the sense we think Dewey intended when he said that democracy "is more than a form of government: it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicative experiences" (Dewey, 1996/1916, p. 87). George Wood has labeled this broad interpretation as "participatory democracy" and described it thus:

"strong" or "participatory" conception of democracy, focuses on public participation as opposed to representation. ... First, the participants must be in the position of decision maker rather than decision influencer; second, all participants must be in possession of, or have access to, the requisite information on which decisions can be reached: and third, full participation requires equal power on the part of participants to determine the outcome of decisions (Wood, 1998, pp. 180-181.)

We find democracy, defined in this way, potentially serviceable for providing purpose and direction for public schools. Not only does it suggest curriculum content – critical thinking, problem solving, language, culture, and communication ... – but also method – participatory, active and cooperative learning, choice, process emphasis, ... - and classroom and school organizational imperatives – heterogeneous, inclusive, distributed knowledge and power. More importantly democracy as explicit purpose provides the moral imperative necessary for creating a *shared covenant of values* (Sergiovanni, 1991) that can replace hierarchy and

positional power as the primary motivational force for commitment and excellence in teaching and learning.

Coming from countries that proclaim democracy as their political identity and promote the spread of democracy as a necessary requisite of human rights and peaceful internal and external coexistence we are interested in the convergence of the democratic intention and the practice of democracy in the school - society's most important institution for social transmission.

We have been encouraged by the Swedish Education Act (1985) and the Swedish curricula in which the "*democratic assignment*" is a national objective. The Education Act stipulates "that all children and young people must have access to education of equal value. All pupils enjoy this right, irrespective of gender, their geographical place of residence and social and economic conditions". The Education Act also specifies that:

education shall provide the pupils with knowledge and skills and, in co-operation with the homes, promote their harmonious development into responsible human beings and members of the community. Particular attention shall be paid to pupils who need special support. School activities shall be structured in accordance with fundamental democratic values. Each and every person active in the school system shall promote respect for the intrinsic value of every human being and for our common environment. Persons active in the school system shall in particular promote equality between the genders and actively counteract all types of insulting treatment such as bullying or racist behaviour. Law (1999:886)" (SFS No: 1985:1100).

The *democratic assignment* is also regulated in the curricula. In the curriculum for the compulsory school it is expressed in this way:

It is not in itself sufficient that education imparts knowledge of fundamental democratic values. It must also be carried out using democratic working methods and prepare pupils for active participation in civic life (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998, p. 5).

The intentions expressed by the Education Act and school curriculum are in turn reflected in course syllabi which are part of the national steering documents. On the local level the syllabi will be further developed by the teachers.

We think *the democratic assignment* embraces the importance of the practice of democracy in schools and classrooms and we think it encourages (municipalities are responsible for schools in Sweden so direction from the state is not mandatory)

Swedish schools to go beyond teaching about democracy to become institutions of a fully participatory nature. We think this democratic assignment is crucially important to increased realization of participatory democracy in centuries old political democracies of North America and Western Europe and vital to the transition to democracy of countries that are evolving from other forms of government and cultural values.

Intercultural Learning – a necessary part of the democratic assignment in a global world

In an increasingly global society with more and more human mobility, communities almost always consist of a conglomerate of people of different origin and with different backgrounds. This “new” situation has also accentuated the fact that in all societies differences exist. However, these differences have not always been as obvious as they are today. It is no longer possible to neglect differences (new and old ones) between the members of society. Or as Will Kymlicka (1995) expressed it: “Globalization has made the myth of a culturally homogeneous state even more unrealistic, and has forced the majority within each state to be more open to pluralism and diversity” (p. 9). But at the same time Kymlicka emphasized that:

Most organized political communities throughout recorded history have been multiethnic, a testament to the ubiquity of both conquest and long-distance trade in human affairs. Yet most Western political theorists have operated with an idealized model of the polis in which fellow citizens share a common descent, language, and culture. Even when the theorists themselves lived in polyglot empires that governed numerous ethnic and linguistic groups, they have often written as if the culturally homogeneous city-states of Ancient Greece provided the essential or standard model of a political community (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 2).

To ensure that the nature of the social transmission is democratic for *all* members of the community existing differences have to be taken into consideration. This means that *intercultural learning* among the members is a necessity as well as is all members’ access to participation in questions of value for the individual *and* the community. In other words there is a need for *democratic and intercultural education*.

In the European context educators most often refer to “intercultural education,” but in United States the term “multicultural education” is more often used (see for instance Banks, 1995; Nieto, 2000). Although there are differences in what is

including in these two concepts the similarities are greater. One important difference is that in Europe the distinction is often made between “multicultural” and “intercultural.” “The term ‘multicultural’ is increasingly being seen to reflect the nature of societies and used in descriptive terms, while the term intercultural is indicative of the interactions, negotiations and processes” (Gundara, 1997, p. 34; see also for instance Katunaric, 1992; Fennes & Hapgood, 1997).

There are many implications for the more heterogeneous societies when it comes to the *democratic assignment* in schools in terms of the necessity of including the intercultural issues. However, intercultural and democratic education have a lot in common if the ultimate goal is to foster students who embrace a pluralistic ideology including positive cultural relations in a democratic society. Amy Gutmann (1996) argue for a combination of multicultural and democratic education that “aims to understand and appreciate the social contributions and life experiences of the various groups that constitute society. Such understanding and appreciation define one common conception of multicultural education, a conception compatible with the principles of democratic education” (Gutmann, 1996, p. 158). The school can move toward a more democratic society if contributing to the creation of possibilities for communication and discussion about what is essential in a society characterized by multiculturalism and value pluralism (Gutmann, 1994; Habermas, 1994).

Pieter Batelaan and Carla von Hoof have proposed intercultural education as “education which aims to prepare individuals for participation in a democratic, multicultural society” (Batelaan & von Hoof, 1996, p. 5). Their definition of intercultural education makes intercultural education a part of the *democratic assignment* because the main aim is to prepare all children to live together in a democratic society. Their ideas are summarized in table one.

Table 1. Content and organization in intercultural education.

	Diversity	Equality
Content/ Curriculum	The curriculum reflects the reality of a multicultural society; different perspectives	Curriculum includes issues of human rights, prevention of racism and discrimination; student learn about their rights and responsibilities
Classroom organisation	Work in heterogeneous groups, create opportunities for cooperation; use abilities and knowledge of all children	Create equal opportunities for participation in the learning process and for access to the materials; validate different skills and knowledge equally

Source: Batelaan and von Hoof 1996, p. 7

METHOD

We are currently in the formative stages of an international research collaboration designed to observe schools in a number of European and North American communities to inquire into the perceived purposes and the actual practices of these schools in relation to democracy. We are aware that other studies have been done on the topic of democracy in schools, such as the IEA study Civic Education Study¹ (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg & Hahn, 2001; Skolverket, 2001; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz, 2001), but our study has another focus entirely and use other methodologies. Our focus is not on student's knowledge about democracy or their attitudes toward democracy. Rather our research project is conceived as an inquiry into the perceptions of educators (principally school leaders and classroom teachers) relative to the ideals of the *democratic assignment*.

We will use a qualitative methodology employing both survey and interview tools to uncover perceptions and intentions. In addition, we will use "participant observation" (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988) strategies in selected schools and classrooms to explore the application of stated principles to observed practices in schools and classrooms. Our current research cadre is composed of university professors from France, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We are exploring potential collaborative relationships with university researchers in other countries as well as our own. We intend to conduct our research in several compulsory schools in different communities in each of the participating countries.

¹ In which both United States and Sweden participated.

The purpose for our research in democracy and schooling is not to draw generalizable conclusions about schools or school systems in participant countries or to compare or make judgments about different school systems in different countries. Rather we ourselves wish to better understand the relationship between intention and practice in selected environments. But even more importantly we hope our research will enable educators to look at their own schools in light of the *democratic assignment* and encourage efforts to improve practices leading to more democratic schools and eventually more democratic, just, and peaceful societies.

During the past school year we have piloted observation and interview strategies in a school in the United States and are developing a written survey to ascertain perceptions of key school constituencies. Since our group includes researchers from various countries around the world we are also looking at how democratic communities of learners may be created in spite of geographical separation using a combination of face-to-face and virtual meetings. It is our desire to conduct our research in an environment compatible with the principles of the *democratic assignment*. Thus we are creating an online “gathering place” for the researchers in our cadre to share their observations, converse about project ideas, and collaborate in any other way that might benefit the project. Since, in this project, we are bringing together a group of researchers who are exploring mutual ideas for the first time we will rely on the researchers in our group to help us create an effective environment for this work. As we work, we hope to will our own democratic community. As new researchers join, they will be expected to adhere—and modify—the structures that are created in the community. A major contributor to the reification of the community will be our individual academic backgrounds. Each of us represents local communities of researchers that have expectations for how research is conducted and reported as well as representing different academic traditions. These differences will be observed and documented as we study the development of this community. (Reineke & Walker, 2006)

WHAT IS AND WHAT MIGHT BE

At the beginning of this paper we posited social transmission as the *raison d'être* of public schooling and concurred with Dewey that in democratic societies democracy itself is the *a priori* purpose for having schools. But we also recognize schools as complex social organisms existing in varied local, regional and national communities. It has been our common experience that the schools we have known are often so taken up with the day-to-day processes and events that the central purpose of education for democracy is seldom addressed or consciously promoted. Rather, “learning” is conceived as an end in itself and “teaching” directed toward developing skills and knowledge within the traditional disciplines of language, mathematics, science, and the arts. We think this perspective that the “end” of education as the transmission of skills and knowledge to be the “what is” of schooling in many contexts. There is nothing inherently wrong or malevolent in this status quo. Surely skillful and knowledgeable citizens are needed in the democratic social context. Thomas Jefferson said “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never shall be” (Padover, 1939, p.89). Critical thinking, judgment, skillful communication are all essential to democratic life, but they are incomplete as ends in their own right. Why do we think, why do we judge, why do we communicate? We want all inchoate members of society to acquire these abilities because they are critical to a form of social living where all individuals have equal opportunity to participate.

But there is more. Perhaps, in this day and age, democracy itself is an insufficient social end. When warfare is still viewed as means to resolve problems. When terror stalks the subways and sidewalk cafes and falls upon innocents from the skies. When religious and sectarian strife threaten to upend the social order and stability of nations. When the gap between rich and poor widens even while science and technology offer solutions to centuries old problems of hunger and disease. When vast numbers of citizens are isolated from society in prisons or refugee camps. When the search for a better life creates a seemingly endless social migration from poor to wealthy nations. When human consumption of the earth’s resources threatens not only future generations but also tomorrow’s weather. We believe that, in this day and age, creating a peaceful, self-sustaining planet must become the explicit goal of democratic schooling. “What might be” are schools all over the world that on a daily basis consciously and directly teach sustainable resource consumption, nonviolence, acceptance of differences, empathy for others, and liberty and justice for all.

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