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Reclaiming Deep Democracy

Adrienne Brant James

The dawn of the 20th century sparked a world-wide movement to apply democracy in schools, courts, and families. These revolutionary approaches drew from the wisdom of Native American cultures as well as from youth work pioneers and were validated by research on group dynamics.

*A democratic nation cannot embrace
silent classrooms.*

~Steven Wolk (1998, p. 202)

As democracies began to take root in the Western world, educational reformers predicted a new era where youth would be partners in self-

governance. The “Spirit of Youth” would be unleashed, said Jane Addams (1909), who founded the modern juvenile court. Schools would become microcosms of democracy, predicted philosopher John Dewey (1916). Self-discipline was the goal of education, declared Kurt Hahn of Germany’s Salem Castle School (1936).

But democratic rule is more difficult than dictating the rules. Many juvenile courts reverted to penal payback under the rubric of “youth corrections.” John Dewey’s Progressive Education Association collapsed as schools traded egalitarian ethics for academic arrogance. In Germany, a 20th century headmaster called for a return to the German tradition of obedience-oriented discipline (Bueb, 2006). Today, democracy in education seems to many a quaint footnote to a bygone era. In reality, one can reclaim these powerful approaches as the antidote to alienation between adults and modern youth.

Cultural Roots of Democracy

When European immigrants left behind their hierarchical homelands, they set out to build profoundly different social structures in North America. They wanted individual freedom and active participation in decision-making. This led to new systems for sharing power, resolving conflicts, seeking consensus, and electing leaders accountable to the people.

The monarchies of Europe presented no governing models for democracy, but these processes already existed among the Native people of Turtle Island (North America). Among the most significant was the Great Law of Peace of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and other framers of the constitution had ongoing, direct contact with the Iroquois, including observing Grand Council meetings and proceedings. This cultural (and political) connection was little-known until the mid 20th century when scholars discovered that much of the U.S. Constitution was based on the Great Law of Peace. In 1952 Felix Cohen wrote:

It is out of a rich Indian democratic tradition that the distinctive political ideals of American life emerged. Universal suffrage for women as well as for men, the pattern of states within a state that we call federalism, the habit of treating chiefs as servants of the people instead of their masters, the insistence that the community must respect the diversity of men and the diversity of their dreams—all these things were part of the American way of life before Columbus landed. (Cohen, cited in Johansen, 1998, p. 24)

The Iroquois Great Law of Peace provided a template for democratic principles of initiative, recall, referendum, and equal suffrage. It established the responsibility of governmental officials to the citizenry and of the present generation to future generations (Cohen,

1942). Finally, in 1987, the United States Congress adopted a resolution to acknowledge the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy to the development of the United States Constitution.

Democratic Youth Work Pioneers

While the former governments of the American revolutionaries did not appreciate democracy, other pioneers in Europe did champion such ideas. Johann Pestalozzi, “father of modern educational science,” espoused freedom and autonomy. At about the same time as the American Revolution, he struggled to create a school with that goal for his students. His vision inspired John Dewey, the father of the progressive education movement. Dewey saw democracy as more than a form of government, but a way of life.

Democracy is a living entity which must be taught, practiced, and nourished continuously.

Jane Addams was a pioneer social worker, feminist, and founder of Chicago’s Hull House, a comprehensive program which dealt with all of the challenges of the community, including school, poverty, employment, adult education, and civic responsibility. In a world that treated children as property of adults, she spearheaded the modern children’s court. Her book *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* is a precursor to the strength-based movement of present day.

Kurt Hahn’s goal of education as self-discipline clashed head-on with the authoritarian culture of the Third Reich. When Hitler came to power, he fled to Scotland where he established the Outward Bound movement. Hahn recognized that all young persons need some *grande passion* which comes from commitment to serving others—to create their own proof of worthiness by being of value to others.

Kurt Lewin is a founder of modern social psychology. He coined the terms *group dynamics* and *social ecology* and showed how the behavior of individuals is profoundly influenced by the nature of the interpersonal “life space” in which they live and learn. His students, White and Lippitt (1960), conducted classic studies in schools and camp settings to demonstrate how different styles of adult

leadership shape children's behavior. Authoritarian discipline sparked underground resistance or open rebellion. Permissiveness led to chaos. Only democratic approaches could create group climates with respectful relationships among adults and peers (White & Lippitt, 1960). At the same time, studies of aggressive children also showed that democratic discipline builds positive bonds while coercive discipline sparks conflict cycles and prevents youngsters from developing "controls from within" (Gump, Schoggen, & Redl, 1957; Redl & Wineman, 1952).

Deep Democracy

Democracy is a living entity which must be taught, practiced, and nourished continuously. Democracy must be passed from generation to generation, embraced by a culture that feeds and supports its growth and fends off efforts to dilute, diminish, or destroy it. A Reclaiming Youth Conference at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, addressed Steven Wineman's list of components of a "deep democracy" that can survive the challenges of the 21st century, including:

- Show fundamental respect for equal worth of each person, including children;
- Encourage self-directed learning and work;
- Participate actively in decision-making structures;
- Share power in systems;
- Negotiate differences;
- Aim for consensus of broad agreements, resolution of conflicting views;
- Transform systemic oppression to systemic equality;
- Exercise leadership accountability to the group; and
- Extend democracy to school, workplace, and home (Wineman cited in James & Bryant, 2008).

Steven Wolk has renewed Dewey's call for the creation of the democratic classroom. Adults need to help children develop and use their voices, to see themselves as empowered to create positive change. Children acquire democracy *by living it*, putting the

community good before selfish individual gain. "You can't come to know what it means to be a responsible, decision-making member in a democracy if you are not in a classroom or a school that practices democracy to begin with" (Wolk, 1998, p. 80).

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Sadly, too many have opted out of these responsibilities as fewer and fewer citizens directly participate in the democratic process (LaDuke, 2002). Part of that is a lack of knowledge about how to participate. Schools especially have become deficient in helping students learn democracy. Too often the focus is simply on knowing the "facts" of how the legal entity known as community is supposed to function. More importantly, as with everything one learns, the opportunity to practice democracy must be a real part of one's experiences.

Those who worked and studied at the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp in the era of Fritz Redl, William Morse, and David Wineman experienced a truly democratic setting—for kids and staff. From that background and in combination with the child-raising traditions of the Lakota and other Native peoples, the Circle of Courage developmental model of empowerment emerged (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002).

More recently, technological advances in brain research have validated these traditional teachings and provide much more awareness and knowledge about individual inherent skill capacity and resilience. And, as chronicled by Lakota psychologist Martin Brokenleg (2010), traditional Native American philosophies of education and child rearing provide a contemporary model for raising respectful, resilient children. This has resulted in evidence-based principles for non-punitive, strength-building assessments and interventions with challenging students (Brendtro, Mitchell, & McCall, 2009). The road back to democracy beckons.

Becoming an active participant in democracy requires developing a sense of membership within that democracy, developing skills for participating

effectively, reaching independent decisions which can be appropriately shared, and giving support and accepting critical feedback. School and classroom communities must be places where:

Care and trust are emphasized above restrictions and threats, where unity and pride of accomplishment and in purpose replace winning and losing, and where each person is asked, helped, and inspired to live up to such ideals and values as kindness, fairness, and responsibility. (Kohn, 1996, p. 102)

Class meetings are an excellent place for sharing, deciding, planning, and reflecting—the best forum for questions that affect most, if not all, students. Individual teachers can teach practical democracy, even if this is not a school-wide movement. Kohn observes that “students will at least have had the experience of making decisions, feeling respected, and being part of a community while they were in your class” (Kohn, 1996, p. 142). Class discussion can be the best single illustration of how community, group dynamics, problem solving, and democracy can be practiced effectively.

Conclusion

Democracy is a cooperative culture which emerged from vast lands of North America at a time when the European continent was locked in hierarchical rule. Democracy was advocated by visionary youth work pioneers who discovered a better system than coercive discipline. And, decades of research on group dynamics, resilience, and youth empowerment attest to the validity of these time-honored democratic traditions.

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*Drawing on page 16 by John Kahionhes Fadden.
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