

Thoughts about Democracy and Schools

Some of the ideas in these comments are drawn from one of the chapters I wrote for in *Beyond the Bake Sale*. Please, understand that I don't intend to offer here a formal scholarly paper that could pass any vigorous review by ERNAPE. I simply offer some personal and informal ideas. I am also *not* going to offer examples and how-to- do-it tips or research results as these are all available in the *Bake Sale* book that my colleagues and I have put forward and in its new Portuguese sibling (entitled *A Escola também se vive cá fora*) or in hundreds of other books on-line and in print, and reports and the papers from this and earlier ERNAPE conferences.

For most of my career a main theme has been Democracy. In many of the hundred of talks I have given at ERNAPE conferences and others, even though I have often disguised this theme with other words. In many ways over my career this has not really been popular topic among educators and politicians, at least not in the US This interest started for me in the 8th grade when I won a medal from a conservative veterans organization in my hometown of Beverly Hills on the topic. And then as the years passed and I moved to the left politically, I became disillusioned that in my country at least our talk about Democracy was more talk than reality and it seldom was up front in discussions of school reform.

This is in part because in the US we think we invented Democracy and practice it so don't bother talking about it much. But today in what may be the one of the last times I get the privilege of talking to a captive ERNAPE audience about what want. I am grateful that Adelina, Ramiro and Pedro, my minders, granted me this freedom. I hope they don't regret it.

Arab Spring stirred many Americans and Europeans to be amazed at the interest in something called Democracy in North Africa and the Middle East. As we saw "Spring morph into many winters of turmoil and confusion", we are reminded that there is nothing easy about defining Democracy, getting it started, or maintaining it.

It is a good time to look at our American version of democracy because in many ways American democracy is in serious trouble. We take it for granted. We think that it happens naturally and that American babies are born as good, democratic citizens. But in 2013 Democracy, as we know it in America, is threatened. Right wing politicians are now in control of the state governments in many of our states. And they have huge influence in our House of Representatives in Washington. Some examples: several states are making it harder for people to vote by requiring people to show written documentation of who they are before they can register or vote. There are serious attacks on the content of the curriculum and textbooks, trying to get rid of material about evolution, global warming, or the struggle of working people to achieve legal trade unions and collective bargaining. The Governor of Maine removed a large mural from a public building because it was "too pro union". In other places, teachers are being attacked for being overpaid and as part of the cause of our economic recession. Large corporations, including many that are multi-national ones, are making huge contributions to conservative political campaigns and opposing any transparency or disclosure of who gets the money. Morris Dees, a well-known legal advocate, confirmed my alarm when he wrote: "Reactionary antigovernment radicals are seething with anger at the democratic institution that make it possible for us to live in a civil society." (Including, of course our public schools).

While I am being critical I also need to remember that America has made great progress in our democratic practices and attitudes over the centuries. Just a few examples: we have abolished slavery (It took a long bitter Civil War, but we did it); we eliminated most of the vestiges of Jim Crow laws that made black people second class citizens; we have incorporated millions of immigrants successfully into our system, and made considerable progress of the rights of women and now of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual and Transgender people; we protect the rights of free speech, assembly, and the press, and the internet fiercely; we have started and

maintained a vast system of free public education from kindergarten through graduate school; we have huge diverse system of private organizations that make up a thriving civil society.

The word Democracy itself is hard to define simply and carries multiple meanings depending on the user, the listener, and the place, Democracy is not a THING or an institution or a political party. It is a not a single, coherent ideology like Marxism. Democracy as I think about it is a collection of many practices and ideas and attitudes. It is as a way of living together and practicing fairness and social justice. It means respecting the rights and differences of all members of a society, or country, or family or institution. One important consistent practice and value is the opportunity for all people to have some voice in the decisions – large and small – that affect them and their lives. While it is hard to define and to pin down what is Democracy with precision, most of us know when they see it or feel it and they know when it is not there.

A key question for me has always been how do public schools in the US and other countries affect the practices of democracy in their realm. A distinguished American historian Samuel Barber wrote that public schools are how a society forges a functioning citizenry, how a society turns young, selfish, individuals into conscientious community-minded citizens who see the link between personal interests and the common good. Schools forge new citizens by teaching history and civics but also by being living examples of what democratic practice is like. I believe that schools in all countries can be "laboratories of democracy", borrowing a term from former US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis. *I believe that schools anyplace in the world can start to be beacons of Democracy by teaching all students about it effectively and by practicing and demonstrating it.* By doing this schools can be models of what democratic practices and values mean in action in families, communities, organizations, states, universities, countries, and international groupings.

Schools forge new citizens in three ways – knowledge, direct experiences, and example. Knowledge from learning history and civics and selected fiction and biography, films and the new media, experience through participating in decision-making in school and community organizations (school councils, scouts, youth organizations) and through observing the democratic practices of schools themselves.

Sometimes in schools and in families and communities it is small steps that are most important on the path to democratic values and practice. An interesting example of what students in all our countries can study is the current situation in Myanmar (Burma) of Aun Sang Su Shi She is taking small but meaningful steps and apparently succeeding in moving a military dictatorship in power for decades toward such practices as voting, recognizing political parties, and permitting opposition politicians to run for office.

There are many other specific things that schools can think about and do – which are already familiar to most of you. Some examples:

- A basic tenet of democracy is that individuals have the opportunity to influence important decisions that affect their lives. Decisions about schools are high on the list of what is important to most families. This means that parent involvement in school decision making is one important example of democratic practice that should be especially valued and practiced by both parents and teachers. And it is an especially significant achievement for democracy when low income and minority parents are given a voice in school affairs for the first time. As you know this means having workable mechanisms for teachers, parents, and students to take part in decision-making, and to voice their ideas and concerns. When these mechanisms practice fairness and inclusion and use practices such as open communication, negotiation, consultation, and compromise when seeking to solve school problems, they are a living example what the abstract idea of Democracy means in action.

- Schools like the larger democratic society will benefit from having good organizations which are directly related to the schools that function

- This important organizational structure includes teacher and staff unions, parent associations and school advisory committees, student government and councils, student interest groups such as scouts, environmental clubs, and ethnic heritage. Of course if such organizations are not themselves able to practice democratic values in their own affairs they may teach the wrong lessons.

- A democratically functioning school will also want to create a reciprocal – give and take relationship with its community. Communities can do a great deal for schools—political and economic support, access to community facilities and services, including cultural, medical, social service agencies, sports but school can do a great deal for communities. Similarly, schools are an important resource in any community. Schools can support local merchants and employ neighbourhood residents. Community members can benefit from using school facilities such as the school library, gym, meeting rooms, cafeteria, and computer lab. Students in vocational programs can set up mini-enterprises, like catering, a gift shop, carpentry and home repair, to fill gaps in local enterprise.

- Well-planned community service programs for students are another low-cost way to strengthen connections between the school and community. Students to learn directly about democratic practices and attitudes through service and other activities in community organizations and in distant and international settings as well, where students can also see and learn from the negative sides as well.

An important often neglected way for schools to be important contributors to advancing democratic values and practices is to find ways to assist the families that they serve to increase their own social and political capital. This means helping families increase their political knowledge and skills, and their connections to other families and people in the community. Such efforts are especially important as a well-functioning democracy needs a citizenry where the gaps between financial and social capital between the haves and the have-nots are not so extreme as they are in the US today.

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