Teachers are Essential to Democracy

By Harold Göthson

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stresses education as a fundamental right, yet hundreds of millions of children are not guaranteed this right. Even many democratic societies cannot guarantee a school that engages all children, due to poverty, high dropout rates, transience, refugee migration, and social inequalities. Yet in all societies that accept the declaration of the United Nations concerning the rights of children, all children encounter teachers. This makes the teacher's task of building a democratic citizenship crucial. It is perhaps more important to understand the meaning of this than it is to understand citizens' failure to participate in elections for president or parliament or local government. It is essential for the relationship between citizenship and education to become the primary curriculum issue and for the teacher's role to become the most important professional role in a democracy.

The Politics of Teaching

Focusing on the role of teachers is not counter to mainstream educational research and politics. In the Swedish educational context, much attention and concern is placed on the results of the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) evaluations that identify numeracy, literacy, and natural science as priority fields for resources and development. The PISA assessments and techniques have been broadly criticized for poor scientific quality, yet its architects have become a kind of international board of education affecting Swedish and international educational politics. The competition between countries has influenced policymakers to define education mainly as a task of supporting the concept of knowledge and academic achievements, pushing education as a tool for building a culture of citizenship and democracy into the background. In Swedish legislation, education as a right is initially formulated as the democratic role of schools but the legislation later stipulates that teaching should be scientifically based on evidence from good practice. This sounds good but is practically used as if science was a value-neutral tool with a taken-for-granted goal to develop "best practice." This reduces the philosophical aspects of ontological and epistemological questions necessary for critical voices to a matter of "common sense" and "what works."

Yet within these frameworks, much emphasis is placed on the skills of the teacher, as indicated in John Hattie's world-renowned report *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement (2009),* which

summarizes hundreds of scientific studies and draws some strong conclusions about the role of the teacher. I am encouraged by his findings because education must always promote reflection, and reflection **must** be aware of conflicting and critical aspects. This means that "one way" thinking can never be dominant if we wish to develop new thoughts. The dictatorship of only one method or one idea in the history of teaching and in the history of autocracies is counterproductive for providing a skillful and thoughtful population.

Democratic Schools and Democratic Societies

Over the last several years, I have been invited to work with schools in the United States. Many of these schools are deeply related to the pragmatic movement, and the educators struggle to maintain the aspect of schools as a place to support citizenship and democracy in a time that is focused on tests and academic skills, even in early childhood. Together we believe in democracy as a right and a tool for shared values that supports diversity, applauds the idea of opposing points of view, and believes in dialogue that confirms possible and diverse viewpoints.

We see this type of dialogue as a starting point because we do not perceive dialogue as synonymous to debate. This perception is so dominant in our practice of democracy—in politics but more importantly, in the daily practice of the media and in everyday conflicts—the idea of **winners and losers**—the idea of the dictatorship of the majority—the dictatorship of the winning viewpoint! When it comes to political or business matters, the people—the everyday recipients of decisions—become targets for implementation, rewards, gifts, sponsors, programs, and curricula on which the recipients will be tested according to the only "winning answers."

It has been said that this is why the former Soviet Union eventually dissolved. To continue to exist, it was necessary to educate their people to think and to question. But these abilities are difficult to control. It is vital to focus on the importance of bringing the issues of knowledge close to the issues of citizenship and democracy. This conviction strongly relates to the American educational experience of pragmatism developed by Charles Pierce and William James, with its most famous practitioners Alice Chipman and her husband John Dewey.

We have all looked to the experience in Reggio Emilia, which supports the idea of citizenship that is dependent on education as a common wealth—a right for all, as important as the right to water, air, and reproduction. This idea is not unique to only Reggio Emilia; this concept was also developed in a time when it was important to construct the idea of shared laws in order to make it possible for the United States to survive. John Dewey, a student of Pierce and James, wrote, "What nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life. This education consists primarily in transmission through communication. Communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession" (Dewey, 1916, p. 11).

Dewey and Chipman believed that in order to promote democracy, a school where you learn to learn together with the "other"—the stranger—is needed. *Xenia* is one of five words that the ancient Greeks, including Aristotle, used to describe love; it means kindness to the guest or stranger. If Aristotle found a reason to consider the point of view of the "other," we know that this is not only a contemporary issue.

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Democracy is Built on a Paradox

The interesting thing about democracy is that the concept is the first human societal idea to confirm conflicts as contributing to a society based on our "agreement" to include all people. The Greeks are said to have constructed democracy as a concept, but their definition did not include women or slaves. They made the *agora* a place for decision-making between a few distinguished men. During World War II, Winston Churchill said, "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried" (UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2013). Democracy offers us a very weak organizational idea of society, since it doesn't necessarily promote the idea of staying together and thinking the same. But unity is a necessity, so this is a paradox.

To be able to support diversity, we have to agree on some shared values. The problem is that even these agreements will be criticized in a democracy built on rights. Yet the question is about the values related to building a democracy:

- The value of subjectivity
- The value of contrasts, variations, and diversity
- The value of mutual interdependence, negotiation, and compromises
- The value of learning as the right to change your mind

A democratic society encourages and values knowledge as a matter of different points of view, complexity, and multiple interpretations in confronting dialogue.

Education and/as Democracy?

Unfortunately, our idea of democracy is not the dominating discourse of **education**. The history of education is a story of obeying, accepting, and separating. The birth of democracy in Swedish education was mainly influenced by the German culture and its discussions about the meaning of *bildung* [education, formation, self-cultivation]. German philosopher and psychologist Johann Friedrich Herbarth focused on organizing the new academic subjects according to established knowledge and research. His idea was to educate civilized citizens by transmitting a cultural code of what should be known. On the other hand, Prussian philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt espoused the idea of a citizen governing himself from his passions and interests. In early childhood education, this was similar to the thoughts of Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and German pedagogue Friedrich Fröebel.

Then the voice of Dewey entered the pragmatic movement, which argued for an education that is useful for both the individual and democratic society. This approach respected knowledge but was eager to connect it with the student's own experiences and background. This became a perspective of major influence in Swedish educational politics after WWII. Dewey believed that in a society built on growing diversities in wealth, religion, and race, it is necessary to create a public school where people learn how to learn with people who are different. Society's differences create different lifestyles and different interests for gaining power. In this kind of society, you have to educate to support understanding, not only of the rights you are given in society but also of the duty you have to respect the same rights for the "others"—your classmates, your neighbors, and those beyond your neighborhood!

This is why the school in a democracy has to be shared and for all. Education is not only an individual need but also the need of a democratic society. Of course, there are other ideas of education and democracy that are common today—ideas that argue that separation is more democratic, for example, when the parents decide to separate their children from others by homeschooling them. Another idea still is to let the church educate children and decide that they should be grouped in classes according to their religion.

In Sweden, the Finnish population has argued for special Finnish schools because of historical oppression within Swedish society. Oppression from the majority is the argument, but this can also be seen as a symptom of a failing school system for all. Others argue for social separation or separation according to skills. One of the strongest arguments from Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia educational project, was to reject separation—of experiences, of thinking and doing, of rationality and emotions, of body and brain, and so on.

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ing established ideas rather than confirming those that are already known. This is a culture of learners who change their minds. Cultures are often defined according to similarities that confirm our way of thinking and our way of living. This results in education being an issue of transmission. Here, the child, the new member, is not welcomed with his or her own curiosity—the child who is always asking "**why**?" In a culture of similarity, the revolutionary question "why?" must be controlled.

A democratic society always invites this question because its citizens respect other cultures (multiculturalism) and are open to dialogue between cultures (interculturalism) and learning from other cultures (transculturalism). This is the challenge for us, as democrats (those who believe in democracy)—whether we are Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or liberals—to invite dialogue and organize spaces for that dialogue that changes us and our society into one that celebrates diversity as a tool for learning.

Through reading the works of Gregory Bateson *(Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 1972 and *Mind and Nature*, 1979), I have learned that it takes an encounter with a difference that we respect as a difference to make us reflect. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote, "Everybody knows very well that, in fact, men think rarely and more often under the impulse of a shock than in the excitement of a taste for thinking" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 13). This places our ability to use our minds to reflect on democracy as an ontological, epistemological, and societal perspective. The democratic citizen has to be seen as a learning species that needs to confront and challenge knowledge within the ethics of democracy. This could bring us to the conclusion that it is important for democracy to have places like schools where we question our truths and celebrate our different perspectives—where we "learn by doing."

The educational project in Reggio Emilia is extending the thoughts and practice of Dewey and pragmatism with its strong focus on the relationship between the city and the schools, emphasizing parental participation as an educational issue related to children's backgrounds, experiences, and interests. In addition, our Reggio colleagues have expanded literacy and numeracy into the concept of the hundred languages, which has great relevance in this time of globalization and transience.

The Reggio educators believe that this is the time to expand the concepts of identity and culture. In his impressive trilogy, *The Information Age*, Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, and 1998) asserted that if we look to the past for a European identity, we will only find hostility toward "the other." He said that a modern European identity must be constructed. Reggio Emilia's broad concept of *progettazione* could be a helpful tool. As I see it, Reggio Emilia's most important contribution to education is the struggle to connect didactics with society and democracy. Carlina Rinaldi, president of the Reggio Children-Loris Malaguzzi International Center Foundation, ended an International Network meeting in Stockholm by saying, "We do not believe in schools; we believe in the necessity of a new global democratic citizenship. Schools are tools for this" (personal notes, June 14, 2007). This means that it is not enough to secure schools; it is fundamental for curricula to challenge traditional teaching patterns. As a matter of fact, Paola Cagliari, director of Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers, *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, said at a meeting with compulsory school educators in Sweden that "most curricula today are based on socio-constructivist thinking; the huge challenge is to change teaching habits" (personal notes, October 8, 2012).

I agree with Carlina and Paola, but I still believe that curricula should identify the relationship between learning, knowledge, and the ethics of schools as micro-political democratic arenas in a more expressive way. This is necessary to develop the education of teachers regarding group learning, parental participation, and relating academic issues to the experiences and interests of children. Therefore, we must challenge the dominating discourses of evaluation and the outcomes of education with teachers, administrators, parents, and all citizens with the power to affect the resources and orientations of school politics.

Teachers are Trying in Spite of Obstacles

Teachers have an essential professional role in a democracy. Education is the key element that makes a democracy work. The school is the institution in society that affects the social identities of every citizen. When society provides school to all, the school becomes a political arena where the students become public citizens

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and not private personalities. If the decision to attend public schools is compulsory, then it is not only a right but also a duty to participate. The school itself becomes a place where you meet others that you have not chosen. Therefore, you will find your identity in a public place that you have a duty to attend.

This creates opportunities to think about and debate how educational organizations support societal ideals. This also makes the teachers' everyday decisions important, because they will affect every student's public identity in a public space. When all children have the duty to attend school, all growing citizens will meet a teacher. This is why the teacher's role is an essential professional role in a democracy.

If all of society's citizens are present in the school at some time, the outcome of political decisions about curriculum and what should be assessed makes the teacher representative of political intentions and compromises. This makes it so important to relate didactical issues, as a whole and on an everyday basis, to the quality of the society that the school supports. Is it a society for individual competition, for division of labor according to societal needs, or is it a society for democratic citizenship where knowledge and learning are part of the rights and needs of a democratic citizen?

Schools were declared compulsory for all in Sweden before democracy was in place. The idea was to follow a moral code in order to gain the obedience of the lower classes. Later the industrial societies forced the school to redefine its classical disciplines so that they related to academic disciplines. Why is this important? Because it shows us that the reasons for a school to exist can also differ within the same school system. This allows for alternative development.

My hope is for a democratic education that fosters a new global democratic citizenship. It will not be easy, but I believe it is crucial for the survival of democratic values in our globalized time. I agree with Dewey's arguments for a school in a democracy. He believed that the definition of rights and duties developed by the founders—the right to vote, to speak in public, to write and publish, and to organize—is not enough to ensure the survival of democracy in the United States. Democracy cannot survive as simply a question of jurisdiction and institutions. Democracy has to be seen as actions that realize the meaning of the agreed-upon values about which we can disagree—the rights of the individual, the value of contrasts and diversities, the value of mutual interdependency, and the value of learning as hypothesizing for the possibility of a hundred perspectives and expressions—inviting complexity in a school where we can learn to use these values.

This is why the United States and all democratic societies need a general education for all. As in Sweden today, there are growing tensions based on diversity in wealth, in race, in religion, and in cultural heritage. Therefore, we need a public school where we meet in diversity and learn to learn together. This leads back to the decisions of everyday life in the micro-society that is lived by teachers, children, and families. There, in real life, the question "how do different children learn?" should be answered, not in general by researchers but by teachers. In fact, it should be the most precious question for each teacher or team of teachers who are working together with their classes.

Again, this points to the crucial role of the teacher and the teacher's need for strategies for reflection. Teachers have to be as careful in their choices as academic researchers, but their guiding principles are different. The teacher is always involved in a process in which she or he is part of the context. The teacher has to relate all decisions to the kind of citizenship she or he supports. This makes the quality of the teacher's reflections crucial. To develop this quality, the teacher needs to develop **temporary** truths, as Howard Gardner argued in a lecture in Stockholm with 1250 preschool teachers in June 2015. He stressed that the teacher's skills for creating truths should be different from a scientist's, but the two roles can inspire each other.

It is necessary to develop schools as reflective and learning places for students as well as for teachers. As a matter of fact, the student's reflection and learning requires the same dispositions in teachers. The teacher has to become a researcher of her or his unique cultural context for learning, guided not only by educational theory but also by democratic values and a hopeful image of humanity and of conflicts that are unavoidable but possible to negotiate. Reggio Emilia has **much** to offer in this regard, partially due to inspiration from the

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work of Dewey. Mostly, the Reggio educators offer us the idea of a researching practice that constructs temporary truths with the children, parents, teachers, and the city as a whole. In the micro-political culture of each school, there is always the question of the choice of projects, of material, and of group formation, as well as the choice to involve children in a reflective culture based on pedagogical documentation that makes learning sharable and enables group learning to become the highest form of learning.

In my work with Swedish schools from early childhood to school-age settings, I have been impressed by the way teachers with minimal support are experimenting and challenging themselves as teams and as individuals. While writing a book together with Swedish compulsory school teachers inspired by the Reggio Emilia educational project, I felt very hopeful that my vision for democratic schools is not only for the future. Rather, this vision of schools is currently being realized in Sweden, in the United States, in Argentina, and in many places around the globe. Therefore, we need to strengthen our international networks. In my visits abroad, I have tried to offer concrete examples to encourage others and to give visibility to this effort by Swedish teachers and others.

In conclusion, we must use the potential of teachers to build a process for an education that struggles to promote a global democratic citizenship that includes all citizens. It is not easy to coexist with the dominant discourse in education today, but our efforts are necessary and crucial for the health and the survival of our democratic cultures.

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