

Schools Must Embrace Democratic Principles



As a new principal, Dina Macksy* sought to answer one question: Why does society send children to school? “Because the law says so,” replied her students. “To be successful in life,” affirmed school board members. And the teachers? “That’s your job to know; you are the principal,” they retorted.

Macksy noted that not one person she asked said that we send our children to school to preserve our democratic way of living. John Dewey would be turning in his grave, she rued. Democracy, Dewey maintained, had to be re-enacted anew in every generation, in every year, in the living relations of person to person, and in all social forms and institutions for its preservation.

Multitudes of young people interact daily in public schools. If the demise of American democracy is to be avoided, Macksy reflected, public schools have to function as the nurseries of democracy. It is their job to prepare young people to be responsible citizens in society—to speak to each other, listen to alternative decisions, and create compromises so that all can live with their consensual

decisions. As students individually become successful, society collectively will be successful.

However, there is no playbook with step-by-step directions on how to do this. So Macksy took small steps to re-enact democracy in her schoolhouse to preserve American democracy. She asked herself four questions that will lead principals toward rethinking democratic schools.

Why Does Society Send Children to School?

Knowing the answer to this question sets the mental model for guiding a school toward its aims. As Macksy visited classrooms each day, she noticed that it is the teachers who do the heavy mental lifting, not the students.

Would students be more motivated

to learn if their school experiences were more engaging and participatory, guided by their teachers in the processes of negotiation, bargaining, and compromising? Do teachers think *with* students or do teachers think *for* students? Do principals think *with* teachers or do they think *for* teachers?

Do the Actions You Take Make Sense in a Democratic School?

In a democratic organization, the lines of communication are open, and decisions are based on cooperative interaction, not someone ordering you around. Many minds working together make better decisions than one mind working alone—especially if all those minds have similar goals for their students.

So why are principals typically the only ones doing the thinking, deciding the rules, and detaching themselves from the people upon whom the rules are enforced? If democracy is a social system, how can principals function autocratically? If democracy is a pragmatic and organic process, why don’t teachers, students, and principals work together to solve schoolhouse problems? How can students learn to be responsible citizens if someone else is making all their decisions?

Why Do We Accept the Convenience of Control?

Do we unknowingly program our students through control without realizing it? Or do we realize it and accept the convenience of it? What Macksy saw as she walked around her school was a giant factory where relationships between individuals were held together by the dynamics of control, which is the antithesis of democracy.

According to Macksy, Thomas Jefferson once maintained that students had to feel free to express themselves in the classroom by sharing their ideas while developing, formulating, and refining their ideas as a way to perpetuate a democratic culture. Are you willing to retreat from command and control in favor of collaboration and collegiality?

Do You Understand the Interactive Nature of People, Data, Systems, and Theory?

Macksy believes that children learn the workplace rules that govern learning at the expense of knowing or understanding how to learn. How can a child focus on creating dreams when lurking behind every corner of a school are the bosses who base their rules of leadership on the creation of as little variance as possible between and among children?


When there is a problem, Macksy now begins by focusing on the multitude of variations that contributed to the problem and accessing all the data that contributed to the variations in the system. She learned that the apparent differences between people sometimes come from the action of the system in which they work, not always from the people themselves.

Preserving Democracy

Once Macksy learned how to solve school problems by asking herself these four questions, she began to feel as if she was on the way to preserving democracy in America because she was practicing it in her school.

So, school leaders, ask yourself these questions. Your answers will divulge whether you are preserving American democracy.

*Dina Macksy is the fictional principal of John Dewey Elementary School in Anytown, USA. She represents a composite of principals whom the authors have worked with over time.

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