Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that education should prepare the child ‘for responsible life in a free society’. Other articles note that children have a right to express their views on matters that affect them (Article 12) and that children have a right to assemble, raise questions and voice opinions (Articles 15 and 13). These articles suggest that children ought to be educated to participate in a democratic society.

A practical approach to democratic education must begin with an understanding of what a democracy entails for its citizens. The word democracy means ‘rule by the people’. As Aristotle pointed out in Politics, ‘Democracy is plural.’ We can see the many manifestations of democracy throughout the world—from representative government in the United States to direct participatory democracy in Switzerland. The majority (61%) of the countries in the world are now democratic, compared with a minority (42%) only a decade ago. The major shift, of course, has occurred in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

The criteria used to classify countries as democratic—free elections and majority rule—are purely descriptive. Yet democracy is more than a particular form of government—democracy represents an ideal of popular participation; we can and do speak of countries as being more or less democratic. Two key criteria for evaluating a particular democracy are the extent of popular participation and the quality of popular participation.
Education for democracy

Given this rough sketch of what democracy entails, the next question is what kind of education should a democracy provide for its citizens. At the very least, citizens need to be literate. Basic literacy is necessary for voting and for acquiring information. E.D. Hirsch (1987) argues that cultural literacy is also important if citizens are to make informed decisions. Language, whether it is used to preserve the status quo or to foment revolution, draws its power and persuasiveness from a cultural heritage, or more accurately from a multicultural heritage. This means not only that students know how to read and write, but also that they have acquired a core of knowledge that helps them to understand their present situation, to envision future possibilities and to communicate effectively.

In addition to linguistic and cultural literacy, education should and generally does provide students with factual information about local and national democratic institutions. Such information makes up the content of the common ‘civic education’ course.

Typically, schools do little more than has been described above to prepare students for democratic citizenship. We seem to assume that if our students are literate and sufficiently informed, they will become good, democratic citizens. Yet the evidence suggests otherwise. In the United States, almost half of those eligible do not vote in presidential elections. Voting for public officials is a minimal form of democratic participation. Ideally, democratic participation should involve public deliberation about social justice and the common good. Yet many students in democratic societies lack confidence in and/or feel estranged from the democratic institutions of their society.

If we wish to educate citizens for democracy in this ideal sense, then we must ask much more of our schools. Schools ought to provide an opportunity for children to learn how to deliberate in common. Children must learn to grasp in a profound sense their common dignity as free and equal persons, and they must learn how to make decisions together that reflect that dignity, freedom and equality (see supportive standards in Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). In this way they will come to value democracy as a ‘way of life’, as John Dewey (1916) put it.

Education for participation offers students an apprenticeship in democracy (Power, 1992). This idea was first put forward by Horace Mann (1957), the father of the American public school:

In order that men may be prepared for self-government their apprenticeship must begin in childhood [...] . He who has been a serf until the day before he is twenty-one years of age cannot be an independent citizen after; and it makes no difference whether he has been a serf in Austria or America. As the fitting apprenticeship for despotism consists in being trained for despotism, so the fitting apprenticeship for democracy consists in being trained for self-government.

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