In: Linsley B, Rayment E (eds) 2004 *Beyond the classroom: exploring active citizenship in 11-16 education.* London: New Politics Network, pages 31-38. ISBN: 0954598202.

Democracy in schools: myths, mirages and making it happen

Priscilla Alderson PhD Professor of Childhood Studies,
Social Science Research Unit,
Institute of Education, University of London

Democracy in schools tends to be seen as an abstract topic to be taught, rather than a reality to be lived. This article reviews some of the myths used to explain and justify why schools have to be undemocratic, and why democracy can only be taught through undemocratic methods. Mirages or misperceptions among educationalists that emerge from these myths are then considered, showing the contradictions and chasms between the aims, methods and outcomes in many schools. The final section reports how students and teachers are working together to dispel the myths and mirages and to create democratic schools.

Myths about democracy in schools: how true are they?

Democracy is a great but unrealistic idea.
Partly true. A glance around the world's democracies shows that they cannot wholly resolve conflicts of interests and values among all their citizens, or ensure that everyone's voice is heard, let alone acted upon fairly. However, there is a general view that other systems are far worse than democracy, and that it is better to attempt to organise societies as democratically as possible than to resort to other systems. If this view applies to international, national and local communities, then why should it not apply also to schools?

Democracy can only exist in communities of mature adults citizens
False. To be a citizen is an automatic right, and does not have to be earned by being 'mature'. If maturity means being rational, informed, wise, tolerant and responsible, then many adults often behave immaturely, and are irrational, selfish and foolish. They do not then necessarily forfeit any of their democratic rights. Democracy relies on having a responsible majority, but it also has to be strong enough to include all kinds of people. Many children are altruistic and rational. There is no direct correlation between maturity and adulthood.

The main activity in schools is to develop and socialise children
Schools turn young 'barbarians' into 'civilised men' (Peters 1965:43)
False. Young children tend to start school with their life-long knowledge, practical moral relationships, and understanding of social obligations already well established. (Damon Dunn Gardner Mayall Miller) When schools infantilise their students of all ages (infant meaning without speech and, in practice, not heard) then students are likely to regress and rebel or retreat into apathy. True, schools are mainly places for expanding knowledge and skills, changing and learning, selecting and forgetting, but these activities are not unique to schools or to childhood, we do them throughout life. We change qualitatively, but there is not an essential change from zero, the barbarian-child, up to an endpoint of the socialised-adult, in the way tadpoles turn into frogs.

Young school children are already social, moral persons, tending to behave like the adults closest to them.

Adults must maintain strict control in schools and therefore autocratic hierarchies are the only option.
False. Yes, adults have duties of care, and ought to ensure that schools are safe and orderly, although many schools are not. Adults can only really promote order and harmony by working with the students, not in opposition to them. And working with others involves respectful listening and negotiation on both sides. Nation states powerfully demonstrate how democracy is linked to social order, and autocracy to injustice and discord. Those who assert the myth that schools must be undemocratic therefore have to answer the question: Why should schools be an exception to the known links between democracy and orderly communities versus non-democracy and disorder? (There are orderly hierarchies, such as religious communities, but people tend to choose to enter and to stay in them, through a form of democratic consent. Schooling is compulsory.)

Democracy concerns impersonal political systems
Partly true, the systems are vital. But the principals of democracy are also expressed or violated through social and personal relationships. These exist along a spectrum from respect and free choice at one end, to coercion and violence at the other. We live between these extremes, sometimes appropriately stressing one end or the other. The balance becomes more complicated when we move beyond individual and into group relationships, as in schools. Teachers, like governments, often deny individuals' rights, claiming that this benefits the majority. Democratic principles offer the means of analysing and negotiating how to balance the great and partly conflicting values of equality, liberty and solidarity, through general systems and also personal relationships.

Democracy in schools should mainly involve teaching political literacy
False. This myth assumes that teaching about democracy mainly involves conveying sets of ideas and facts, often abstruse and remote one, and usually about how adults organise democratic processes. It presents democracy as dull theory instead of as intensely important, interesting and emotive living reality, such as disputes on sharing control and resources that affect everyone.

Democracy in schools 'for citizenship' mainly concerns preparing young people for future adult citizenship (QCA 1998)
False. This myth treats school students as human-becomings, and less than fully human-beings. It is illogical to suppose that children can learn and understand concepts of justice, freedom of the press, or due process of law, and yet not notice or mind these rights are denied to them at school. For example, when they are treated unfairly, their speaking and writing are regularly censored, or they have no right to explain or appeal if, for example, they are suspended. When citizenship and rights are seen as adult privileges, it follows that these are denied to children. If democracy in schools is set in the future away from the present, democracy dwindles into empty rhetoric. Daily practices deny and contradict the precepts that are taught. Students become bored, cynical or angry about the ensuing confusion and hypocrisy. Teachers, often against their own will, preach 'do as I say, not as I do'.

Past the mirages and misperceptions

All the above myths about education 'for adult citizenship' and not 'of and with young citizens' support undemocratic schools, which counteract education about democracy. Educationalists who believe the myths fail to see how unjust and unpleasant so much schooling is. They blame and punish young people if they rebel against conditions that adults would not tolerate. They see mirages of schools as necessarily 'disciplined', or as pleasant productive work places – some schools succeed in being so, but many do not. Here are just a few examples of real life in many schools, beyond the mirages.

Just suppose, as an adult, that you arrive at work and wait outside locked doors in the rain. You queue until you and your hundreds of colleagues are all suddenly allowed in together, struggling through crowded corridors. Up to a quarter of your day is taken up with queuing and marching, often in enforced silence (Griffith 1998). You have no space of your own but work in different parts of a large campus with regular crowded mass treks to the next workspace. You have nowhere to leave your coat and belongings and must carry them everywhere with you. You have a few short break times, but may be 'kept in' as a punishment, with no right of appeal. If you try to appeal, you will only get further punishment. The very unsavoury toilets are locked for most of the day, and over-crowded when you are 'allowed' in. You cannot have anything to drink all day; water fountains are turned off, 'in case you have water fights'. There are petty rules about uniform, jewellery and any hints of personal expression. These in turn stop freedom of speech because if you ask for a forum, such as a council, to review any rules democratically you are told, 'No, because you will only want to talk about uniform and you are not allowed to.' With breakfast club and after-work club you spend about 50 hours a week at work. When you arrive home your partner says, 'Your boss has just phoned to tell me that you have broken that agreement I signed with her. You were late back from lunch and she says I must stop you watching television for a week.' You reply, 'But I was helping a friends whose mobile was stolen.' 'Tough,' says your partner, 'I don't want any more lame excuses. Now get on with that work that has to be ready for tomorrow.' And so on. (From Alderson 2003, and partly drawn from our research on students' views about their rights in schools Alderson and Arnold 1999.)

Before we can have education for democracy in democratic schools we have to correct the misperceptions based on myths that children and young people are so very different from adults. And also that somehow they benefit from, or do not realise, or do not mind, being treated so disrespectfully. We have to see the contradictions and chasms in many schools, between their aims to help their students to be mature responsible citizens, their methods of denying students responsibility and respect, and the outcomes in many schools of high levels of unqualified, disaffected school leavers, with people aged under 35 years being the least likely ones to vote.

Creating democratic schools

It doesn't have to be like this despite the strong economic and political pressures that force many British schools away from being democratic. A review of the history of schools shows many exciting examples of democracy across the decades although, depressingly, most existed quite briefly and depended on exceptionally inspired teachers. Yet still, around the world, students and teachers are working together to dispel myths and mirages and to create democratic schools. From countless examples,

here are just three that illustrate the huge range of struggles towards democracy: one is international, one from Rajasthan, India, and one from London.

International support for democratic schools

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) promotes 'participation rights'. These include children's rights:

to respect for their worth and dignity;
to express their views freely in all matters that affect them, and to have their views taken seriously;
to develop their skills and talents fully;
to freedom of information, and of peaceful association and assembly;
to freedom of thought, conscience and religion;
to learn to live in peace, tolerance, equality and friendship;
to privacy, respect and fair discipline;
to freedom from discrimination and exclusion.

Like all rights, children's rights are qualified and not absolute. The Convention respects children's welfare and safety, and their need (though this cannot be an enforceable right) for supportive parents and a loving family. Far from undermining families and schools, or being selfishly individualistic, the Convention sees children's rights as inalienable to all members of the human family, promoting social progress and better standards of life in larger freedoms, and laying foundations for peace and justice in the world.

The Convention is a tool for change. All governments have ratified the Convention except the USA and Somalia, which has no government. They have to report regularly to the UN on their progress in implementing the Convention in law, policy and practice. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN 1995, 2003) has criticised the British government for not yet basing teacher education on the Convention, or publicising the Convention widely to adults and children alike, or insisting that students may speak and have a fair hearing if there are proceedings to suspend them from school. The UN Special Rapporteur on Rights to Education has also eloquently criticised Britain's undemocratic education systems (UN 1999, Woodward 2003).

Yet there has been progress. Since 2001, the government has told all its departments to consult children and young people about services for them, including schools. There is a danger that these will be token, selective, and potentially misleading consultations. Much work and training are required to ensure that the consultations are fair, respectful, use sound methods, and are taken seriously in efforts to improve the services. But this is a start.

The Children's Parliament in Rajasthan

This next example shows how democracy can be understood and promoted by young people with little education. Through the 1980s, village night schools opened for working children. The curriculum connects closely with the children's daily life and needs; the teachers are graduates of their own village school. In 1993, the Children's Parliament opened, in order that the children could really influence school policies, besides learning about democracy, the vote, how to stand up for their rights, and about the politics of poverty. The 2,500 children aged 6-14 years elect their 17 MPs aged

11-14 years. The MPs inspect the schools, listen to the students, and may sack lazy teachers. The Parliament helps villages to improve other amenities, such as water supplies. It holds children's festivals, publishes a magazine, and has a consciousness-raising touring puppet show about rights. Far from children being 'socialised' by adults, they are teaching and helping adults, even in this very patriarchal and caste-conscious society. (Srinivasan 1999)

Siobhan in London

The great democratic principles can only truly be respected when put into practice in countless small details. This final example shows one facet of democracy, the equal inclusion of disabled people, and shows how changes can be achieved through the individual efforts of disadvantaged people. Siobhan and her mother fought 'epic battles' for her right to attend her local primary school where she was happy. Siobhan described her move to secondary school when she was 11 years old. (Alderson and Goodey 1998: 142-4).

`\Well that was hard work because there weren't no lifts, and for the first year I was there, lots of teachers had to come to me. First, I had no lessons, I was sitting in reception…some teachers came down to me, some didn't. [It was] kind of horrible, 'cos, see I wasn't mixing with friends…'cos they was all going to their lessons, so it kind of built a barrier a bit. In the end they were rescheduling the lessons, near the end of that year. When the lift was completed it was much better.'

Later, more disabled students joined the school and Siobhan felt the teachers came to accept her. Instead of talking down to her, now 'they talk to me more personal, suiting my age'. Siobhan's mother agreed.

'There was a lot of difficulties at first…but once that was sorted out the teachers were very good and supportive…I feel Siobhan went back in that period, but she learnt a lot about herself also and about life as a result. It was very tough, she had some name-calling as well…but that was at the beginning…I felt that, yeah, it would be nice to protect Siobhan, I mean I would love it as [her] mum, but that's not what I wanted. I wanted Siobhan to face the world as it was going to be.'

Siobhan, and thousands of young people like her, are not only facing the world, they are changing it.

Conclusion

For centuries, leading educationalists have advocated learning by doing, instead of by listening passively to confusing dry abstractions. Even very young and unschooled children can understand complicated aspects of democracy, rights, justice and respect, through their activities and achievements.

Democracy is practical and pervades all relationships. We cannot avoid either 'doing' democracy or else being actively undemocratic; there is no middle way. Undemocratic schools powerfully teach, by example, lessons of intolerance, mistrust, disrespect, repression and fear of change. If they preach democracy, they teach duplicity. Students who try to improve matters learn to fail and to feel powerless and hopeless, a disastrous prelude to adulthood and to the future of democracy. Schools that work to promote democratic approaches demonstrate and encourage the personal

strengths of active citizens: listening tolerance and cooperation, respect and equality, trust and hope, being open and adventurous. Such schools gain from the fresh ideas and efforts of many of the students and staff, and not only of the few 'top' people. When students are active citizens in the school community, as the Indian children and Siobhan showed, they learn as much if not more from the extra activities as from the basic curriculum. And, in the words of the UN Convention they lay the foundations for peace and justice in the world.

References

Alderson P 2003 *Institutional rights and rites: a century of childhood*. London: Institute of Education.

Alderson P, Goodey C 1998 *Enabling education: experiences in special and ordinary schools.* London: Tufnell Press.

Alderson P, Arnold S 1999 *Civil rights in schools*: ESRC Children 5-16 Programme Briefing no 1. Swindon: ESRC.

Damon W 1990 *The moral child*. New York: Free Press

Dunn J 1988 *The beginnings of social understanding*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Gardner H 1993 *The unschooled mind*. London: Fontana.

Griffith R 1998 *Educational citizenship and independent learning.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

Kagan J 1986 *The emergence of morality in young children*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mayall B 2002 *Towards a sociology for childhood*. Buckingham: Open University Press

Miller J 1996 *Never too young: how young children can take responsibility and make decisions.* London: NEYN/ Save the Children.

Peters R 1965 *Education as initiation*. Inaugural lecture. London: Harrap for Institute of Education.

QCA – Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998 *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools* (Crick Report). London: QCA.

Srinivasan S 1999 Personal communication, In John M 2003 *Children's rights and power*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 231-9.

UN 1989 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child.* Geneva: UN.

UN 1995 United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. *Consideration of reports submitted by State Parties under Article 44 of the Convention. Concluding observations: UK and Northern Ireland*. Geneva: UN

UN 1999 *Report of the mission on the UK by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education.* Geneva: UN.

UN 2003 United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. *Consideration of reports submitted by State Parties under Article 44 of the Convention. Concluding observations: UK and Northern Ireland.* Geneva: UN

Woodward W 2003 Interview with Katarina Tomasevski, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education. *The Guardian*, 14 July.