

Michael Apple and James Beane

Democratic Schools

By: Dr. Thomas Doyal

In Michael Apple and James Beane's, Democratic Schools (1995), they paraphrase John Dewey, "If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led" (p. 7). Apple and Beane lay out examples of various schools that meet seven criteria that they have decided make a school democratic. According to Apple and Beane, democratic schools have the following characteristics.

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.
4. Concern for the welfare of others and the 'common good.'
5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an *ideal* to be pursued as an *idealized* set of values that we must live and must guide our life as a people.

7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life. (pp. 6, 7)

Apple and Beane profess to have a "democratic faith" as described by John Dewey. This faith in the ability of students to participate in their education is the foundation of the reforms that Apple and Beane highlight. This work is more of a description and justification than a call to action. The purpose is to show democratic schools with their vision, successes, unrealized potential, and defeats.

Apple and Beane point out that many schools working to become more democratic do it in a context of experimentation and often work with children who live in very difficult situations. These children are often seen as a problem to be solved through drill and skill remediation. Apple and Beane decry this and insist that, "these children, too, have a right to the best of our progressive ideas. Our task is to reconstruct dominant knowledge and employ it to help, not hinder, those who are least privileged in this society" (p. 17). Students in these situations are oftentimes lumped into esteem-building academies or alternative programs that concentrate on basic skills and firm discipline. While these schools are not rebuked, Apple and Beane do call upon W.E.B. Dubois in *The Negro Artisan* (1902) to provide this caveat, "the ideals of education, whether men are taught to teach or plow, to weave or to write, must not be allowed to sink into sordid utilitarianism. Education must keep broad ideals before it and never forget that it is dealing with souls and not with dollars" (p. 21).

To illustrate this philosophy, there are examples given of schools that failed and died out because they could not overcome the challenges that lay outside the school walls. Students felt safe, loved, and powerful while at these schools, but the conditions that subjugate poor people raged on and overcame the good the school was doing. Apple and Beane promote a solution of empowering young people to become the change makers.

“Democratic schools are both (humanistic and child-centered) . . . in many ways, but their vision extends beyond purposes such as improving the school climate or enhancing students’ self-esteem. Democratic educators seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in school, but to change the conditions that create them” (p. 11).

By fostering the growth of change makers, these democratic schools are making a broader impact than with just their students. The vision is to literally transform whole communities.

Apple and Beane see this kind of transformation as a choice, but the morally correct choice, yet they stop before declaring it the only choice. They declare, “Educators in a democratic society have an obligation to help young people seek out a range of ideas and to voice their own”(1995, p. 13). Yet, there is little instruction or few tools to lead the average educator toward the goal of making school a more democratic place.

Apple and Beane discuss the "deskilling of teachers" through set curriculums and content standards, yet these schools understand that there are gatekeeper skills and procedures that decide the future of students. To withhold this information from students would accomplish the opposite of the goals stated, thus,

“A democratic curriculum seeks to help students become knowledgeable and skilled in many ways, including those required by gatekeepers of socioeconomic access. In short, democratic educators live with a constant tension of seeking a more significant education for young people while still attending to the knowledge and skills expected by powerful education forces whose interests are anything but democratic” (p. 17).

Apple and Beane do not give specific instruction on the building of a democratic school, but set out models that show the way and highlight the questions that we need to ask in order to make school a more democratic place.