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Dewey's Democratic Conception in Education and Democratic Schooling: Lessons from the United States for Japan in a Time of Democracy in Crisis

Naoshi Kira†

Democracy is in crisis around the globe, especially in the United States due to the results of the presidential election in 2016; it is now a bitterly divided society. In this context, this article reviews the democratic conception in education presented by John Dewey as his Democracy and Education *celebrated its centenary also in 2016. A few key concepts of Dewey's ideas and structural features of democratic schooling were combined to develop a conceptual framework to analyze democratic schooling. Then, two U.S. democratic schools were comparatively analyzed using the conceptual framework, including participation in a small diverse community. This study concluded that democratic schooling has enormous potential to educate citizens who can become the effective agents of change desperately needed in the larger society, although the number of schools which systematically implement it is limited due to various obstacles. Lessons for Japan include the idea that giving students the authority to decide what to learn and how to learn it can lead them to take responsibility for their own education. There is anecdotal evidence that many graduates of the first democratic school examined here work in service and social justice professions, so further research is needed to pursue this theme along with others.*

Keywords: John Dewey; democratic schooling; learning communities; shared decision making; trust; the United States; Japan

Introduction – Problems, the Year 2016, and an Overview

Democracy is under assault and in retreat around the globe, a crisis that has intensified as America's democratic standards erode at an accelerating pace, according to *Freedom in the World 2018*, the…annual report on political rights and civil liberties…by Freedom

† Toyo University,
e-mail: kira@toyo.jp

> House… “Democracy is facing its most serious crisis in decades,” said M. J. Abramowitz, [its] president. “Democracy’s basic tenets—guarantees of free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of the press, and the rule of law—are under siege around the world”[1].

Democracy is in crisis around the globe. The results of the U.S. presidential election and Britain’s vote to leave the European Union (Brexit), both held in 2016, have been widely seen as signs of the rise of inward-looking populism in a so-called post-truth era. In particular, the current U.S. administration has promoted inward-looking, America-first policies ever since its inauguration in 2017, embodied, for example, through stricter immigration policies, continuous attacks on the news media critical of the administration, etc. As a result, the United States is now a bitterly divided, intolerant society.

The year 2016 happened to be the centenary of the publication of *Democracy and Education* (1916) by the prominent American philosopher, John Dewey (1859-1952) who stressed the importance of education in a democracy. One hundred years after the original publication, this book is still well-read around the world, reflected in the fact that in 2016, there were “many conferences, special issues of journals, and book-length sets of essays on Dewey’s oeuvre” (Hansen, 2017, xix)[2]. Importantly, Dewey was fully aware that creating and maintaining a democracy was a formidable task, and he “[made] it plain that the United States [was] not yet a democratic society” (ibid., xxi). That is why, 100 years later, “[w]hat Dewey has to say about education, schools, teaching, curriculum, knowledge, learning, society, democracy, justice, and more, remains profoundly pertinent today” (ibid., xix).

In this context, the purpose of this study is to review Dewey’s democratic conception in education, mainly presented in *Democracy and Education*, as well as to examine democratic schooling in the United States based on his and other perspectives in order to learn lessons for Japan. In a time of democracy in crisis, it is very important to ask how a democratic society can educate its children to become effective citizens who not only understand democracy, but also have the will to take responsible actions for it because a democracy needs to be continuously recreated and reinvented by its members. Democratic schooling was designed to nurture such citizens, so this study explores it from Dewey’s and other perspectives along with actual practices. In this study, a few key concepts of Dewey’s ideas and structural features of democratic schooling were combined to develop a conceptual framework to comparatively analyze practices at two democratic schools. This study aims to learn lessons for Japan partly because democracy is in crisis in Japan too, as the current government has undermined democracy, for example, by pushing through numerous bills without enough deliberation, and partly because traditional education is still dominant in Japanese schools despite various attempts to introduce more democratic practices.

The significance of this article lies in the fact that it reviews Dewey’s democratic conception upon the centenary of his seminal work and examines practices of democratic schooling in the United States, with the understanding that democracy is in crisis, in order to draw some lessons for Japan. In terms of research methods, it is based on an analysis of existing literature on philosophical foundations and practices of democratic schooling.

1. Philosophical Foundations and Structural Features of Democratic Schooling

In this section, I will review philosophical foundations of democratic schooling, put forth primarily by John Dewey as the most prominent American philosopher presenting the democratic conception in education. There are a number of studies that review it, so this section will be brief and focused on essential points regarding democratic schooling (Gutmann, 1987; Apple and Beane, 1995; Parker, 1996; Sehr, 1997; Hahn, 1998; Knoester, 2012; Noddings, 2013; Stitzlein, 2014)[3].

In his seminal work, *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey stressed the importance of education in a democracy with two explanations:

> The superficial explanation is that a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated. Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education. But there is a deeper explanation. A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience (p. 87).

As pointed out by Nel Noddings (2013), Dewey also emphasized the importance of members with numerous and varied interests and of cooperative intercourse with other groups. Dewey thus valued not only nurturing educated voters in a democracy, but also allowing students to experience democracy as a way of living together in a diverse school community.

Dewey also said of the ideal conditions of democracy and education:

> A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder (1916, p. 99).

Moreover, Dewey regarded a school as "a miniature community, an embryonic society" in *The School and Society* (1899, p. 41), and stated in *Experience and Education* (1938) as follows:

> A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth (p. 40).

Dewey envisioned a school as a microcosm of the larger democratic society in which students and teachers learn from each other through interaction on equal terms, although teachers are responsible for creating a learning environment that is conducive for students' continuous growth [4]. Last but not least, Dewey's vision encompassed not just reform at the

school level but also transformation at the societal level, as he was a social reformer. Dewey's democratic conception in education is thus composed of such keywords as democracy as a community life, diversity, participation on equal terms, learning community, etc.

I need to mention here that although Dewey presented his democratic conception, "he failed to fully explain how to achieve his vision" (Stitzlein, 2014, p. 61). It can be said, nevertheless, that "this fits with Dewey's pragmatist spirit to the extent that he would not want to pin down specific habits or guidelines outside of particular real-life contexts" (ibid.). This is why democratic schooling has been implemented in various forms to accommodate the specific needs of students, staff, and community, as shown below.

It should be stressed, however, that Apple and Beane (1995) distinguish democratic schools from other progressive schools that are "simply humanistic or child-centered" (p. 11). They define democratic schools as those that "seek…to change the conditions that create [social inequities in school]" (ibid.). Knoester (2012) also state that "since powerful forces of inequality and suppression exist within our society…a democratic school must be aware of, and continuously thoughtful, innovative, and courageous in counteracting these forces (pp. 6-7). This study uses the above definition of democratic schools that seek to influence social change as promoted by Dewey.

Despite the variations, democratic schools need to ensure the existence of the following three structural features: democratic forms of school governance, classroom management, and human relations (Mosher, et al., 1994; O'Hair and Reitzug, 1997; Kira, 1999, 2004)[5]. Democratic school governance takes the forms of direct democracy in a small school (or a small unit within a large school) in which every member is involved in shared decision making, as well as of representative democracy in a larger school in which representatives of students and staff make decisions. Democratic classroom management consists of good student-teacher relationships, student authority to make decisions, discussion-based pedagogy, etc. Democratic human relations often mean that students can get to know each other and their teachers well to form relationships based on trust.

Behind the three structural features, the importance of small size has been emphasized as an essential foundation for democratic schooling as it helps to build trusting relationships and promote personalized learning (Sizer, 1984; Meier, 1995, 2002). In fact, Meier (1995) goes so far as to state that "[s]mall school size is not only a good idea but an absolute prerequisite for qualitative change in deep-seated habits" (p. 107) and that "schools must be so small that governance does not become the topic of discussion but issues of education do" (p. 108).

These structural features of democratic schooling are combined with the few keywords of Dewey's democratic conception to develop a conceptual framework to analyze democratic schooling practices in the next section. The conceptual framework consists of (1) participation in a small diverse community (human relations), (2) shared decision making (school governance), and (3) student-oriented learning communities (classroom management). The three aspects are closely interrelated, and democratic human relations lie at the foundation of democratic school governance and classroom management (Kira, 1999).

2. Democratic Schooling in Action – Limitations and Practices at Two Schools

In this section, I will first mention two sets of important limitations about democratic schooling practices. I will then analyze two democratic schools in the United States using the conceptual framework developed above.

2.1 Limitations and Obstacles of Democratic Schooling

I will start with limitations. First, although the democratic schooling that Dewey envisioned seems necessary as the foundation for a sound democracy, it has not been widely implemented in the United States. In this regard, Ralph Mosher, et al. (1994) express their "concern for American youth who demonstrate little concern for others," and state that "[s] tudents have been taught about democracy, but they have not been permitted to practice democracy. Most American schools remain benevolent dictatorships" (pp. 1-2). In other words, they imply that most American schools offer the traditional, didactic mode of education in which students remain passive, and that the number of schools implementing democratic schooling in a systematic manner is limited, causing youth to be inward-looking. This is a perennial problem mentioned also by educators and researchers of democratic schooling, who instead promote more participatory, democratic approaches (Meier, 1995; Parker, 1996; Sehr, 1997; Knoester, 2012; Stitzlein, 2014).

Second, as the background of the first point, there are various obstacles to implementing democratic schooling. One obstacle is the standards-based reform that has been implemented in the United States under federal education laws since the 1990s with its emphasis on student achievement on high-stakes standardized tests and accountability, making democratic schooling harder to implement (Meier, 2003; Noddings, 2013; Meens and Howe, 2015). Another obstacle is people's belief that democracy is for the rights of adults, and not of children (Apple and Beane, 1995, p.7). Finally, as presented above, mainstream schooling has been based on traditional education, so one more obstacle is that teachers and students are not used to instructional practices based on democratic principles.

2.2 Comparative Analysis of Democratic Schooling Practices at Two Schools

In this study, I selected two democratic schools based on the following three criteria: (1) the school calls itself a democratic school; (2) it emphasizes Dewey's democratic conception, and (3) there is sufficient information to analyze its principles and practices. The first school is a school-within-a-school (SWS) at Brookline High School (BHS) in a suburb of Boston founded in 1970. The second school is Mission Hill School (MHS), a pilot school within the Boston Public Schools, founded in 1997. A brief explanation of each school is presented as follows [6]:

> SWS consists of 115 students and staff (5 teachers and a coordinator), and its mission is to assist students to take responsibility for their own education through trusting relationships developed in a small community. SWS is an alternative democratic program…established by a small group of students, teachers, and parents…in 1970, when feelings of anti-establishment were mounting…During the first several years of the SWS founding, individual freedom and rights were emphasized…and there was a strong, individualistic atmosphere, but…in 1977, a town meeting system was established, and SWS was trans-

> formed into a democratic community. SWS…practices [democratic schooling] advocated by Mosher who was influenced by Dewey's philosophy of democratic education (Kira, 2004, p. 14).
>
> [MHS was] founded by [a prominent educator,] Deborah Meier and colleagues in 1997… [and] is a small, racially and culturally integrated public pre-K-8 school using Dewey-influenced progressive education strategies and dedicated to educating students for democratic citizenship. Students are admitted to the school based on a lottery, and they graduate from the 8th grade after having produced and defended robust portfolios of student work in each subject (Knoester, 2012, p.1)…The school is small—only about 170 students attend…(41.4% Black, 27.8% Hispanic, 22.8% White...)…The school is one of 21 pilot schools in Boston Public Schools, [so MHS]…enjoys autonomy in…governance, hiring, schedule, budget, and curriculum (ibid., p. 5).

Here I will present a comparative analysis of the two schools using the conceptual framework. First, in terms of participation in a small diverse community, both schools stress the importance of small size, but take different approaches, reflecting differences in the socio-economic status of the students they serve. SWS is a small program currently with 120-125 students within BHS with its approximately 2,100 students, and the small size helps students and staff to get to know each other well and to develop the sense of community and trust which underlays the foundation of democratic practices. SWS was originally a white-dominated program, but students and staff were concerned about a lack of diversity and voted in town meeting in 1987 to adopt an affirmative action policy to ensure that one-third of the members are students of color and/or foreign-born, commensurate with the proportion at BHS (Bresman, et al., 2009, p. 69). As a result, SWS has become a diverse community, and students of color have also stated that they have a sense of belonging and feel safe in the tight-knit community (Thompson and Erdmann, 1995; Kira, 1999).

MHS is a small pre-K-8 school with 170 students, and the small size helps staff to get to know their students well, resulting in relationships based on trust that make democratic schooling possible (Knoester, 2012). MHS is located in Boston and has a diverse student body with about 70% black and Hispanic students who come mostly from low-income families in Boston.

In terms of shared decision making, both schools emphasize its importance, but differ in their approaches. SWS is a small direct democracy, where important decisions are made at a weekly 70-minute town meeting chaired by student members of the Agenda Committee (seven students and one staff member). Importantly, students and staff each have one vote, and students tend to learn to develop a sense of responsibility to their community as they can influence important policies at SWS [7]. Students far outnumber staff, but they make responsible decisions, and older students tend to become role models and lead the way in school governance (Kira, 1999). In addition, students' involvement in various committees also plays an important role in assisting them to develop a sense of responsibility to their community as committees are much smaller in size (as in the Agenda Committee above), and hence they can take initiatives and make a contribution more easily than in large town meetings (ibid.).

By contrast, MHS is a "staff-governed" school, and "staff [as opposed to the principal in most schools in Boston] make many important decisions together" with inputs from students

Table 1: Comparisons of the Two Democratic Schools

	SWS at Brookline High School (9-12)	Mission Hill School (pre-K-8)
Participation in a small diverse community	Became a small diverse community after town meeting adopted an affirmative action policy in 1987 (33% students of color and/or foreign-born). There is a sense of community.	A racially and culturally integrated school with a diverse student body (70% black and Hispanic, 23% white, etc.), and there is a sense of community.
Shared decision making	A direct democracy based on a weekly town meeting attended by everyone in which each member has one vote, chaired by Agenda Committee (7 students and 1 staff member).	Staff make many important decisions together. It is a representative democracy with the governing board consisting of staff, parents, community members and 2 students.
Student-oriented learning communities	Its English classes are untracked, multi-grade democratic learning communities. In other disciplines, students have less course choice.	The curriculum is based on three sequential interdisciplinary themes and pedagogy stressing five habits of mind.

Sources: The studies cited in endnote (6) were used.

(Knoester, 2012, p.58). It is a representative democracy, in which "[t]he governance structure includes a governing board with the power to hire or fire the principal and set policies for the school, consisting of one-third teachers, one-third community members, and one-third parents, plus at least two student representatives" (8th graders) (ibid., p. 56). MHS values the voices of parents and community members because it is a pre-K-8 school with young children and because it seeks to be a community-oriented school.

In terms of student-oriented learning communities, both schools emphasize learning communities, but take different approaches reflecting their different standings. At SWS, English classes best represent democratic learning communities, as they are untracked, multi-grade classes where teachers lead, but "seniors [old-timers]…model, teach, and inspire others" (Bresman, et al., 2009, p.70). SWS students have a say in choosing those English and humanities courses, as they vote on them for the upcoming year after discussion on the classes proposed by teachers. "In other disciplines, such as math, science, and social studies, students have less course choice because of state and local graduation requirements" (ibid.). Although they benefit from numerous course offerings at BHS, a lack of autonomy in the curriculum is a disadvantage of being part of a large public school.

By contrast, MHS is a pilot school with extensive autonomy, reflected in its main curriculum and pedagogy. Its curriculum is "framed under an umbrella of three sequential whole school interdisciplinary themes each year…[and] the thematic units are offered on a 4-year rotational basis [so that] students experience learning within these themes twice" (Knoester, 2012, p. 78). "[T]he central focus of the curriculum…is the development of five…habits of mind, useful for effective democratic participation and deliberation, as well as in the academic disciplines" (ibid., p. 72)[8]. Moreover, "[a]ll classes are multi-aged [without]…tracking," (ibid., p. 76) and students engage in meaningful learning in diverse learning communities. These two features allow teachers to provide students with coherent learning experiences at MHS. Table 1 contains the summary of the comparative analysis of the two democratic schools based on the conceptual framework.

Several limitations as well as positive aspects of democratic schooling are presented above, but there are also difficulties at the school level. First, democratic schooling is a

time-consuming enterprise, and students and teachers may find it inefficient and frustrating at times. Students at SWS find some town meetings boring or tiresome as there are routine issues to be discussed, and discussions often drag on (Kira, 1999). Teachers at MHS may feel that they are pressed for time as they regularly have to attend faculty meetings for shared decision making in their busy schedule (Knoester, 2012).

Second, these schools also have to deal with difficult trade-offs between financial stability and autonomy. The two schools are both public and have the financial stability to survive, but in return, they also have to give up some autonomy. SWS is an alternative program in a large public high school, which has survived for almost 50 years with the support of the administrators. Although SWS has enjoyed the autonomy in governance to assist its participants to practice democracy, it has to make compromises, for example, in curriculum in terms of course offerings and contents due to being part of a large public school [9]. Although MHS is a pilot school in Boston and enjoys extensive autonomy, "the mayor and City Council… made plans to move [it]…into a different school building and community" in 2012 despite multi-level protests (ibid., p. 67). These accounts show the difficult trade-offs encountered by these public democratic schools, with no easy solution.

3. Lessons Learned from the United States for Japan

In this section, I will draw some lessons on democratic schooling from the United States for Japan. Based on the analysis presented above, two lessons can be learned.

First, when learning takes place in small diverse learning communities where students have a say in what to learn and how to learn it in order to connect their learning to their lives and experience, they tend to start learning for themselves and taking responsibility for their own education. In addition, when students are given ample opportunities to learn from one another, they tend to develop a sense of community and belonging. These things happen more easily in smaller classes where there are trusting relationships among members.

In Japan, the traditional, lecture-based instruction still dominates for the fulfillment of the national Courses of Study as well as for the preparation of entrance examinations. As a result, many Japanese students do not have a sense of ownership of their learning [10]. In this context, the new national Courses of Study to be implemented from 2020 onward promote self-directed, dialogic, and deep learning which can help students learn on their own and collaboratively. One major caution is not to go to the other extreme of letting students do whatever they want, from the prevailing extreme of giving them almost no authority in what to study and how to study it, as Dewey pointed out in *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), *Experience and Education* (1938), etc.

Second, when students can make and modify school rules, or at least when their voices are heard and respected, they tend to feel empowered and to start thinking about how to improve their school, while taking responsibility for abiding by the rules that they helped to create. This happens more easily in a small school where there are good relationships between students and teachers, and students develop a sense of belonging and responsibility. As well, the sense of responsibility to their community—an important feature of democratic citizens—is often carried on after graduation, as SWS staff members write:

> Our record of college acceptance looks very much like that of its host school—one of the most competitive…—yet our graduates often choose to devote their lives to community service, teaching, and further education after college. As Bob Weintraub, principal of [BHS] observed: "One of the characteristics of SWS graduates…is so many of them work in service and social justice professions. That is not an accident. The culture of SWS builds a sense of responsibility to [their] community. They live that ethic in school and carry it with them into the wor[l]d of work" (Bresman, et al., 2009, pp. 68-69).

This is an extremely important aspect of democratic schooling to be emphasized in the face of democracy in crisis.

In Japan, school rules are usually imposed on students without much explanation, leaving them to feel either helpless or antagonistic. A major problem with this practice is that students become passive recipients of rules, without any experience of making and modifying rules, rather than active agents of change. What is needed is not a sudden change, but a gradual transition to giving students some authority to modify school rules within an institution of representative democracy, such as student councils, in order to improve their schools.

Conclusions and Future Directions for Research

Over 100 years ago, Dewey envisioned schools as microcosms of democratic society in which students experience democratic ways of living together in a small community to help them become effective agents of change. Democratic schooling has been operationalized in many ways. Based on the examination of the two democratic schools, this article concluded that democratic schooling has great potential to educate citizens who can become effective agents of change, although the number of schools which systematically implement democratic schooling is limited. There are also a variety of practices in the areas of education for democratic citizenship, education for civic engagement, etc., conducted at schools with or without connections with local communities to revitalize democracy, which are not included in this study [11]. The limitation of this study is that it focused on democratic schooling with the three afore-mentioned criteria.

Here I will point out two areas of research needed in the future. One area is further research on democratic schooling in terms of its details. For example, research is needed on admission policies and student characteristics. Students are often selected through a lottery among those who want to join the school, but can democratic schooling work for students who have not made this choice? Research is also needed on the trade-offs between school financial stability and autonomy. The ultimate question is how to maintain long-lasting and autonomous democratic schools.

Another area of research is a tracer study of graduates of democratic schools including their professional lives. There is some evidence that democratic schooling is also an effective means of academic preparation in that students move on to college at a rate much higher than the norm especially among those from low-income families at MHS. As for the professions of graduates of democratic schools, however, there is only anecdotal evidence that many SWS graduates work in service and social justice professions as presented above. So, systematic research is needed to clarify the impact on graduates in their adult lives.

Finally, democratic schooling at best can be effective because it gives participants ample opportunities to think deeply and collaboratively about their learning and their organization in order to become active agents of change, desperately needed in the larger democratic society in crisis.

Notes

1. https://freedomhouse.org/article/democracy-crisis-freedom-house-releases-freedom-world-2018 (accessed August 1, 2018).
2. Examples of such books are: Garrison, et al., 2016; Phillips, 2016; Waks and English, 2017.
3. Democratic education has larger meanings than democratic schooling, as reflected, for example, in the fact that democratization of education has at least the following three meanings: "universalization of educational opportunities;" "decentralization of education systems;" and "participatory practices in school and class" (Kira, 2004, pp. 5). As this study focuses on the third meaning, I will primarily use the term, "democratic schooling."
4. Dewey thus redefined education as "the art of giving shape to human powers and adapting them to social service" (Dewey, 1897, p. 31), emphasizing the importance of developing students' individuality and responsibility (Kira, 2004).
5. For example, Mosher, et al. (1994) stated, "any serious effort to educate for democracy will have to begin by systematically organizing classroom management, school governance, and the relations among administrators, teachers, and students based on democratic principles" (p.2).
6. Information on SWS comes from Thompson and Erdmann(1995), Kira (1999, 2004), Bresman, et al. (2009), and that on MHS from Meier (2002, 2003), Knoester (2012).
7. It should also be stressed that to respect minority opinions at town meetings in SWS, "if significant disagreement arises over a topic before town meeting, the community is polled and those with minority points of view are given more opportunities to speak than the majority" (Bresman, et al., 2009, p. 69). This seems a fair measure to honor minority opinions, and the minority opinion is sometimes adopted at the final vote.
8. The five habits of the mind consist of: "What is the evidence?" "What is the relevance?" "How is this connected with other structures, forces, or facts?" "From whose viewpoint am I looking?" "How could it be different?"(Knoester, 2012, p. 72). Moreover, MHS was a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES)—an organization (1984-2016), originally founded by Theodore Sizer and promoted "ten common principles," including personalization, democracy and equity, etc., taken from the CES web site: http://essentialschools.org/common-principles/ (accessed August 14, 2018).
9. From Dewey's perspectives, it can be said that SWS lost its autonomy in offering progressive interdisciplinary curricula by being part of a large public high school in contrast to MHS.
10. There have also been a variety of attempts over time in Japan to implement progressive education practices at schools, in which students are encouraged to take initiatives in connecting their learning to their lives and learning collaboratively with their peers, and hence have a sense of ownership of their learning as well as a sense of responsibility to their school, as documented, for example, in Yamasaki and Kuno (2017).
11. Such studies in the fields of education for democratic citizenship, education for civic engagement, etc. include Levine (2007), Campbell, et al. (2012), Boyt (2018), and Rebell (2018).

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