

Session 13

Pulling It All Together:

Creating Classrooms and Schools That Support Learning

Democratic Schools: Imperfect, But Better Support Authentic Learning

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We will be able to create a successful system of education nationwide only when we base everything we do on what is known about how children and youth develop and learn. —James Comer, M.D. (2001, p. 1)

Creating a system of education nationwide for more powerful learning is fundamentally a democratic endeavor. Schools require authentic, real-world tasks to educate children (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2003, pg. 222). These real-world tasks require the support and participation of students' families and communities. For instance, in the United States, communities and a democratic government fund the majority of K-12 schools.

Darling-Hammond (2003, pg. 225) notes that successful schools have a collective perspective across the school. Attempts by the federal and state governments to use funding to impose common goals, a shared ethos and common norms of instruction never result in schools reaching their full potential to create active and supportive learning environments. Policies of a democratic government are imperfect because they must be based on compromises and cannot be based solely on “what is known about how children and youth develop and learn” as James Comer recommends in the quote that introduces this essay.

To successfully create deep learning environments, schools must develop a consensus among students, teachers, administrators and parents on goals, desired ethos and instructional norms. Democratic processes involving teachers, students in and parents in school decisions are a powerful tool for achieving that consensus.

To avoid learning anarchy, the goals, ethos and norms of classroom must reinforce each other. This reinforcement can happen only if teachers actively support creation of a learning environment and work collaboratively to develop instruction that reflects the central concepts and ideas in the disciplines, especially those ideas and concepts central to many disciplines. Government policies may inform goals, ethos, and norms, but the government cannot mandate the whole-hearted embrace by teachers throughout schools required for students to realize their full learning potential.

School personnel alone cannot create deep learning environments. Community support, which is facilitated by democratic processes, enables authentic instruction in real-world contexts. High school students who experience such instruction achieve greater results in “complex performance tasks” and also do better on conventional tests (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996).

Although democratic processes remain incapable of basing decisions about schools only on what is known about how children and youth develop and learn, they do facilitate the authentic instruction that leads to deep learning. Democratic processes promote the formation and maintenance of a collective perspective on learning across the school, engender a public willingness to commit to funding schools, and facilitate community involvement in creating authentic learning environments that improve student learning.

References

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