

# Democracy in Everyday Classrooms

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## **Preface**

One of the missions of “School as Learning Community” is to realize democracy in each and every school, which in turn means to realize democracy in each and every classroom and also to raise every child as a democratic agent.

Democracy can be defined as “social equality and the right to take part in decision-making.” ( cited from *Longman dictionary of contemporary English* ) Also as John Dewey put it, democracy is “ a mode of associated living,” or a mode of “ conjoint communicated experience.”( *Democracy and Education* )

Every child has to learn in school that he/she and his/her classmates have the right to be treated equally, and to take part in the decision-making. At the same time he/she has to learn that to bring the right to realization, he/she has to make effort to communicate with his/her classmates who have different opinions from that of his/hers.

But the problem is that most of the classrooms, at least in Japan, are not the arena of democracy, which can be described as above. On the contrary, teachers seem to refuse the children to become democratic agents in their classroom, though not consciously in most cases.

This paper is trying to show, through the descriptions of classrooms, firstly, what kind of behaviors teachers do in everyday classroom scenes make it difficult for the children to become democratic agents, and secondly, to show what kind of educational practice can promote democracy in classrooms, which enables children to become democratic agents.

These descriptions, both the former and the latter, were not taken from the schools that call themselves “Learning Community,” the former from very ordinary Japanese schools, while the latter from some “excellent” schools. I call these schools “excellent,” according to my experiences of a researcher who has been engaged in observing classrooms for many years. But one thing for sure is that these schools aim for the same direction as the “Learning Community” schools do. So I hope this presentation may help the practitioners as well as the researchers understand the significance of “Learning Community” practices.

## **(1) Everyday classrooms that don't raise democratic agents**

1-A) Teacher uses questions only to let the lesson go on.

This was a 6 graders class of a Japanese elementary school. Children had been studying a story spending several lessons. At the beginning of the day's lesson, the teacher asked the class, “You have learned a lot about this story. Now could you tell me what part of the story is Shimako's (the heroine of the story) sentiment most brilliantly expressed?”

One boy answered, “I think it's on page 22, where it says, ‘Shimako's tear rolled down her cheeks.’” The teacher responded, “Well, does anyone have any other answer?”

Then a girl answered, “ It's on page 24. It says, ‘Shimako bit her lip very tight, while the tears came out of her eyes.’” This time the teacher said, “Well, that's true, but has anyone found any other expression?”

Another girl stood up and said, “I think it's the last part of the story, when Shimako cried moo.” In the story, Shimako, a daughter of a farming family, had been taking care of a cow very well, but at the last part of the story, Shimako's family decided to give the cow to a family of a distant village, so she cried like the cow in the sorrow of parting.

Having listened to the second girl's answer, the teacher responded, “Well, yes, that's where

Shimako's sentiment is very clearly described. Today let us study this last part."

Judging from the teacher's response, he seemed to have decided before the day's lesson started, that the topic of the day was the last part. The first question meant for him just an introduction of the lesson, just a means to let the lesson go on. He seemed to have no intention to listen to the children's answers and think about the possible various answers the children might have.

This pattern of questions and answers between a teacher and children is very commonly seen in Japanese classrooms. If a child have had this kind of experience repeatedly, it's very natural for him to start to think, "it's no use to think about the questions teachers ask. Because teachers always have the right answer. They don't really want to know what I think."

Thus most children in Japanese schools, as they get older, quit thinking in classroom and just wait for the answers teachers are going to give. And some of them search for the right answer the teacher have. So in any case, most of the Japanese children cannot grow up as a learning agent, which in turn means, they can't become a democratic agent, because they don't want to express their own ideas, especially when it's different from that of the others. They don't think by themselves what is right or wrong concerning social issues, just waiting for the answer a political leader might give them through media.

1-B) Only the children who raise their hands have the right to speak in the class

You can find such classrooms very commonly all around Japan, from elementary to high school level, that only some of the children who raise their hands speak in the class, while the others (at times, most of the others) never raise their hands nor speak, just sitting at the desk silently. The teacher asks a question, only a couple of children raise their hands, then instantly, the teacher calls one of their names, and the child answers correctly, soon the next question of the teacher follows. Then again, the same children, two or three out of thirty or more children, raise their hands. One of them is called his/her name, stands up and answers.

This type of classrooms is also very common in Japanese schools. Strangely enough, there seems to be a rule that only those who raise their hands have the right to speak in the class, and quite a few teachers keep this rule very strictly.

But when you observe such classrooms very carefully, you can be aware that some of the children who don't raise their hands also think and try to find out what to say. But before they decide to raise their hands to speak out their opinion, a clever child has already answered what they wanted to say, and the teacher asks the next question. This rule gives the chance to speak only for the children who are very good at speaking in public and very fast to decide what to say. As far as the teacher observes this rule, children who are not confident enough to speak in class will never have the chance to speak.

Looking back to the definition of democracy, "taking part in decision-making," such children are very unlikely to grow up as a democratic agent. Every child has to learn to speak out his own opinion before his classmates. He has to learn that he has the right to express his own ideas and opinions in any situation when he wants to do that.

## **(2) Everyday classrooms that promote democracy**

Then, what kind of educational practice is needed to realize democracy in everyday classroom. Below are some examples of the descriptions of such classrooms.

2-A) "Please stand up, those who don't understand what he means"

This was a first grade math class of an elementary school. The theme of the lesson of the day was the "Secret of numbers." On the blackboard the teacher put up a table of numbers on which 1 to 100 are listed in 10x10 format. She asked the class, "Let's share what you have found in examining this table." The children came in front of the blackboard one by one and told what he/she had found, for example, "Every number of this column has "1" in the right side."

But as they are the first graders, some of them didn't speak very well, and sometimes it

was not so easy to understand what the child meant. In such a case, this teacher asked the class, “does everyone understand what he means?” About half of the class raised their hands, but some didn’t. In most of the classrooms in Japan, after such question and answer, teacher goes on to the next stage even if some of the children don’t raise their hand, which means that they don’t understand.

This teacher was different. She asked the class, “OK. Then please raise your hands who don’t understand.” Five or six children raised their hands. The she told them, “You are OK if you don’t understand.” And this time, she asked the rest of the class, “Can anyone explain it for these guys who don’t understand?” A boy raised his hand, came in front of the classroom and gave a good explanation. Then the teacher asked again, “Please raise your hands who still don’t understand.” Three children remained. What surprised me was that the teacher asked them, “Could you please stand up?” and then asked the rest of the class, “Could anyone explain it once more so these three kids can understand?”

Another boy came up and gave a brilliant explanation. But still, one girl, whose name is Kokoro, said, “I still don’t understand.” The teacher added, “So this time, let me explain it,” and gave her an explanation. The girl finally understood, and sat down, smiling. Then the teacher went on to ask for the next person to present his/her findings. Kokoro raised her hand to show that she wanted to present her own findings. Some minutes later, once again another child gave a complicated presentation and the teacher ask the class, “Please stand up, those who don’t understand what she means.” Kokoro stood up again, smiling. She seemed rather happy to do that.

In most of the classrooms in Japan, when a teacher says, “those who don’t understand, stand up,” it means punishment. It means that you didn’t listen to what the teacher said carefully. But, in this class, the situation was totally different. If you don’t understand anything in the class, you don’t need to feel ashamed at all. You have a right to be taught until you understand it very well. On the other hand, if any classmate is in trouble in understanding anything, you have obligation to explain it to him/her until he/she understands it.

You need to ask any questions without hesitation when you want to learn something. To be a learning agent, it is indispensable to ask questions whenever you don’t understand very well. This classroom assures children this very basic condition for learning.

2-B) “Something is lacking in you guys!”

This was a second grade class in an elementary school. The theme of the lesson was “what do we do with our challenge in jump-roping?” This class had been challenging in jump-roping, in which whole class jump-rope together, using one long jump rope. The children set a goal that they can jump rope together 30 times in a row without any mistake. They started the project in September, practicing several times a week, but now it was in January, still they could do that only 10 times in a row at best.

At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher asked the class, “Do you still want to continue this challenge?” As the school year in Japan ends in March, they could practice only ten days from the day until the end of the school year. (As this district had a heavy snowfall, they had to practice in gymnasium in winter, and they were allowed to use it only two times a week.) The teacher told the fact to the class and tried to motivate them to think, but the children didn’t talk very much. They said only like, “I still want to continue,” or “I think we can do that if we try,” for example. Thus the discussion didn’t heat up at all, contrary to the teacher’s expectation.

Meanwhile, a boy, named Yuta, stood up and walked around the classroom. It seemed that it happens very often. The teacher walked up to him, asked him if he wanted to say something, touching his shoulders. Yuta didn’t say anything, walked back to his chair and sat down. Some minutes later, he started to growl, murmuring something. Probably he had a developmental disorder, it seemed to me. He repeated these actions, walking around and growling, several times, while the uninteresting class discussion went on.

Suddenly, Yuta said, “It’s absolutely impossible!” to the class. I had thought that he did not listen to the discussion, but this utterance proved that he was listening to the discussion carefully and kept thinking about it. A boy argued against him, “We can do that if we believe so.” But Yuta added, “It’s inconceivable!” Another boy asked, “Why is it inconceivable?” Then Yuta answered, “Something is lacking in you guys!”

At this moment, the atmosphere of the class changed completely. The teacher responded, “Yuta said something very important, don’t you think so?” The other children started to express their opinion one after another. “What is lacking, Yuta?” “That’s what we ourselves have to think about!” “I think strong motivation is lacking.” Then Yuta responded and lead the discussion as if he became a teacher, “Well that’s true, but still three things are lacking!” A girl stood up and said, “Bravery is lacking, I think.” Yuta said, “Two more!” The discussion heated up suddenly, very different from a couple of minutes ago.

I felt funny, listening to the discussion and watching Yuta behave like a teacher, almost starting to laugh, but soon after that, I was deeply moved to tears. It is often said that teachers must take good care of every child, though it’s not so easy to do that literally. But if a teacher really does that, the children also take good care of each other. They respect each other. It doesn’t matter what disability or impairment a classmate has. In such warm atmosphere of a classroom, children think and learn collaboratively, as learning agents.

The children of this second graders class teach us what democratic relationship must be like. There are various kinds of people in our society. Some of them have disability. But every one of them is precious as a person. This is the respect for the fundamental human rights. Democracy stands on this respect, like Yuta and his classmates showed us.

**\*For the reference of Japanese audience:**

以上の実践例とその考察については、守屋淳他編著『第2巻 子どもを学びの主体として育てる—ともに未来の社会を切り拓く教育へ—』（シリーズ「新しい学びの潮流」全5巻）ぎょうせい（近刊）、の第1章に掲載予定です。