

Democratic Education and the Creation of the Loving and Just Community

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Democratic Education and the Creation of the Loving and Just Community Kathleen Kesson, with Christopher Koliba and Kate Paxton

Harmony School: Family Meeting and the Development of Student Voice
Harmony School, an independent pre-K through secondary school located in a university town in southern Indiana, was founded in 1974 with the purpose of renewing the civic mission of public schooling. Its handbook states that the school is “designed for the development of the ‘whole person,’ encouraging the students to achieve academic excellence, feel good about themselves, and see learning as a lifelong activity,...[while striving] to give the students a sense of personal control over their lives.” In addition to its innovative curricula and methods, Harmony also provides professional development opportunities for public school teachers and

carries out research on democratic education and school change. Recently, Harmony has become host to the National School Reform Faculty, an organization of over 20,000 teachers and principals working in over 1000 schools to create more caring and just communities in schools throughout the country.

The commitment to democratic education is described in the handbook as the effort to “provide a real-life environment that would foster the skills necessary for active and constructive participation in our country’s democratic process.” Harmony’s democratic orientation is interpreted in different ways by each member of the school community. One teacher explains, we’re trying to teach kids to be responsible citizens, and we’re trying to do that in a way where we teach them by having them practice what it means to be a responsible citizen. So the democratic education part of Harmony is about practicing being a responsible citizen, it’s not necessarily just about the kids getting power over X, Y, or Z; it’s really about practicing being a responsible citizen. So I think that’s the base philosophy behind the entire school. (Teacher, personal interview)

In the years since its founding, Harmony has gradually strengthened its democratic ethos through innumerable hours of committee meetings, school-wide Family Meetings, and the daily workings of the classroom. Like any community, Harmony has struggled with negotiating the boundaries of democracy and power, and maintaining the delicate balance between the individual and community.

Family Meeting takes place regularly in all of Harmony’s programs, and is one of the foundations of the school’s democratic practice. At Family Meeting, students learn to solve their own problems, make meaningful decisions, plan future group learning experiences and social activities, and assess the work of the group. The structure of Family Meeting differs from program to program depending on “age-appropriateness,” but all Meetings emphasize student leadership, community feedback, and collective decision-making. In the middle and high school Family Meetings, students chair meetings, set the agenda, and are responsible for maintaining order during the discussion. Teachers are subject to the same guidelines as students for adding items to the agenda, contributing feedback, and voting. Harmony’s faculty members stress the importance of Family Meetings for learning opportunities. In the high school, the learning significance of this practice is underscored in that students receive one credit per semester in social studies for their participation in Family Meeting. A high school teacher explains,

We really seriously do think that family meeting is training for engaged citizenship, and responsible citizenship. Because that’s really how communities... work in the first place; they have to have meetings. And for you to be able to deal with the kind of meetings that you’re going to be dealing with later on in your life, to be an engaged person, Family Meeting’s a [great] model. Because it’s hard. It’s really hard. And you can observe people making mistakes, and you can observe people doing it right. (Teacher, personal interview)

For teachers at Harmony, practicing democratic decision making means not only a commitment to innumerable discussions amongst themselves, but also to nurturing this process with their students in classrooms, Family Meetings, and all other school activities. Democratic process goes beyond the limitations of weak democracy, encompassing more than the simple definition of majority rules; it means a commitment to instilling a sense of confidence and leadership in students; the responsibility to share one’s opinions while knowing that compromise is essential; and the humility and humor to accept that each individual will not always get his or her way. A teacher explains,

The big thing is that we expect the kids to be leaders. And to have sixty leaders is really hard; it makes it very difficult to deal with a lot of situations, but we think it's worth the trouble, because that's really what we're asking them to do, to speak up, and to understand that just because you speak up doesn't mean you're gonna (sic) get your way all the time, but at least you have a responsibility and an obligation to let people know what you think, and that that's important. And if you can't accept that you may not get your way, then your perspective might be really off, and so your sense of humor will certainly be off. (Teacher, personal interview)

A commitment to democratic practice at Harmony School means, first and foremost, the acknowledgment that children should be active participants in making choices about their learning and their school. Here, democratic education is an ethos: it encompasses the ongoing efforts to help children learn who they want to be, and what they want to do, and how they can accomplish these dreams; as well as a respect for Harmony's teachers, their professionalism, their high quality teaching, independence, and innovation.

Finally, the practice of strong democracy in the school is connected with a vision, not only for the children who attend Harmony, but also for the society in which they live; a vision that affirms the rights and responsibilities of all citizens to be who they want to be, to be treated and to treat others with caring and respect; to celebrate differences while, in the words of Harmony's director, Steve Bonchek, continuing efforts to "compromise and work out decisions with people unlike yourself."

Barre Town Middle Elementary School: Problem-Solving and Moral Development Through Literature

In the Barre Town Middle Elementary School in central Vermont, students in the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades can take a class called Problem-Solving Through Literature, an alternative to a traditional English class. Using literary works, students identify with characters in the literature to gain insight into the character's situation, to learn how the character took action and developed strategies to deal with problems in life and, in many cases, how the character contributed to society. The students then apply what they learn from the characters to their own lives. The two teachers who oversee this project, Ravell Allen and Beverly Scofield, introduce students to metacognitive concepts such as Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" and Kohlberg's "stages of moral development," utilizing these concepts in their analyses of literature and in reflecting upon their own experiences. Every topic of study has an activity that is based on academic considerations as well as personal exploration and involvement.

Skills learned in each grade level build so students at the end of 8th grade have learned how to exercise:

- independent study (note taking, interviewing, resume writing, letter writing, research, creative problem solving)
- self-regulated learning (time management, planning, decision making, goal setting, cooperative work, self-evaluation)
- meta-cognition (thinking about thinking, articulation through journaling)
- meta-awareness (who am I? reflection through discussion, reflection through journaling, listening)

Students in the 6th, 7th and 8th grade are asked to complete a service-learning project by the end of the year. These projects emerge out of their reflections over the course of the year. Discussions about moral reasoning lay the foundation for students to engage in meaningful service to their community. These service-learning projects emerge from stated community

needs, which are discovered through periodic community needs surveys that the students employ. One of the PSTL teachers comments on how the service-learning component of the curriculum evolved:

In a way, when we first started doing this, we didn't even think of it as community service-learning (CSL). It really seemed to be a natural extension of what we were doing with the literature.... We talked with the kids about issues of concern for them in the world, things that were going on that they were concerned with but felt powerless to do anything about. So I think it was the second year of the program, it almost seemed that both Bev and I without even talking with each other were thinking along the same lines. Why don't we try to match these kids up with somebody who could be a mentor? We must have heard something about CSL because we thought students would work with a mentor to develop their abilities to try to solve some problem in the community (personal interview).

Students carry out various individually designed service-learning projects, often based on inspirational biographies of service-oriented individuals such as Eleanor Roosevelt. One student wrote a story and then published and sold it to get money for the battered women's center. Some of them engage in teaching, such as the student who won a national award for teaching children with physical disabilities to ride horseback.

By combining discussions about moral reasoning with the reading of literature and service-learning projects, these students learn the skills and dispositions of active democratic citizenship. They gain the ability to apply concepts to real life situations. These concepts are derived from the stories they read and applied to actions that they undertake as a part of their service-learning projects. By developing relationships with adult community mentors, students are afforded the opportunity to expand their intergenerational connections. This provides them with the "social capital" that some researchers are now saying is so important to the cultivation of democratic character. They develop the abilities to deliberate, to negotiate and to organize their work. As one principal explains:

I can't say enough about how much these kids learn about how to work with other people and other organizations. They learn how to schedule space. They learn about organizations, they learn about hierarchies, how organizations function, and to respect other parts of the organization needing to be informed of certain activities. (Personal interview)

The students develop the capacity to take an active role in the decisions that impact the life of their school. One 7th grade student found that the skills she learned in PSTL have helped her become more articulate and thoughtful in her work on the student council.

Research on this project is designed to follow students through their school experience to assess the effectiveness of service-learning on future development as citizens. One senior at the local high school reflects back to his experiences in this program in the 6th grade:

When the topic of community service-learning was mentioned, since we didn't know much about it, it seemed like just another assignment.... So sure you were doing a lot and investing a lot of time in it and eventually it caught up with you and you realized this is all that I've done, and it wasn't that bad and it's benefiting not only myself, and is a learning experience but addresses some of the needs of the community. And then this project (setting up a teen center) that began in 7th grade, I'm still working on. Five years has been a long time. I never would have imagined that I would still be doing it.... I think I've learned from the experience

of always taking an active role, leadership role. I've gained great skills from working on this project and interacting with different people. Since almost none of the other classes have any community service-learning component, I carry these traits...more questioning, more critical thinking, definitely not as passive...I would be willing to say that this community service-learning back in the 6th grade has shaped who I am today. (Personal interview)

We believe that this literature-based curriculum, combined with service-learning projects, is a fine example of how students learn to take action in the world based on moral decision-making. Studies of programs that involve students in active engagement in their communities, either through service, or as we will see in the next narrative, through direct political action, “indicate that this involvement may, in fact, be an important stepping stone to later (democratic) participation” (Berman, 1997, p. 145).

Tar Creek: Education and Political Activism

In a somewhat isolated rural middle/high school in Northeastern Oklahoma, home to a population comprising numerous Indian tribal groups as well as whites, students participate in a service-learning club called the Cherokee Volunteer Society. The group has been facilitated by Rebecca Jim, a local environmental activist, Clanmother with the Tribal Efforts Against Lead (an environmental organization based with the Quapaw Tribe), and the school's guidance counselor, since 1995. Students began their service-learning venture back then with a community recycling project. The next year they decided, with financial assistance from the Cherokee Council, to build a traditional council house in the schoolyard. The third year of their existence, they began to tackle the serious environmental problems in their community.

The community in which these young people live is the site of one of the nation's worst hazardous waste sites, a result of extensive lead and zinc mining in the early part of the century. The community is home to acres and acres of toxic lead tailings (which children play on), a water system contaminated with heavy metals, a solid waste incinerator, poisoned creeks, contaminated wells, asbestos waste from an abandoned tire plant, and abandoned mine shafts which periodically cave in (sometimes destroying buildings and roads). The people of this community suffer exceptionally high rates of cancers, kidney disease, miscarriages, immune deficiency disorders, and most notably in the children, physical and cognitive symptoms associated with high levels of lead. There was little public outcry or activism over these alarming issues until 1995, when students of Ms. Jim's Learn and Serve club got interested enough to tackle the problems.

Students began investigating the environmental problems in their community using the Internet, primary source documents, interviews with community members, and on-site analysis (of water and soil). The students began, from their research, to identify some causal connections between the contamination in their community, chronic (and in some cases terminal) illnesses in their families, and some of their own learning disabilities. These students, many of whom had been disengaged from school and learning, became informed, passionate activists.

One of the first things these students learned was that there was a vast amount of information about the environmental problems in their community, but it was not in a form accessible to the general public. So, one of their first tasks was to do research on the many aspects of the problem—fish contamination, lead poisoning, asbestos pollution, mine water flooding, environmental racism, and jobs vs. the environment. Their research papers were collected, along with poetry, songs, and first person narratives into an anthology entitled *The Legacy*, which was published by the Cherokee Nation. A new anthology is in the works.

Every year, students host the Tar Creek Fish Tournament and Toxic Tour (the irony in this is that there are no fish in Tar Creek, except for the occasional neon green or orange creature that has somehow survived the poisons). Begun on Earth Day 1998, these annual events are designed to heighten public awareness about the Tar Creek Superfund Site. The students host speakers from the EPA, US Fish and Wildlife, the BIA, the Indian Health Service, and representatives from local Indian tribes. As part of the events, they guide people on “Toxic Tours” (walking, running, bicycling, rollerblading and riding) to see the acres of chat piles (mine tailings), neon waters, and devastated ecosystems that pervade this community. They organize local musicians for a “Heavy Metal Blues Fest” (clearly, they have maintained their sense of humor throughout this work!). These events raise money for their many other projects: the purchase of outdoor signs to be posted along the polluted creeks and chat piles, educational programs for elementary school children, the collection and analysis of teeth and hair of affected adults and children, and traveling to national conferences to present their findings.

These students have developed many skills and capacities working on these various projects. Clearly, they have mastered the art of identifying significant problems in their community. They have learned to carry out research in the public interest, and to share their new knowledge in a useful and appropriate way. In addition to the science and math concepts necessary to their understanding of the problems, they have learned a great deal about the structures of civic life: practical things like how to write to legislators, contact government officials, organize cultural events, circulate petitions, engage in peaceful protest (they have on occasion picketed polluters in the community), and about public relations. For their many public appearances on television, radio, at community meetings and at local, state, and national conferences, they have had to hone their public speaking talents. Their writing skills are diligently improved as they write for newspapers, magazines, and their own published book projects. Nancy Scott, the coordinator of Cherokee National Learn and Serve, expressed her admiration for the things these students have accomplished:

There was a lot of denial in that community before the students started this Tar Creek Project. I mean (the contamination) was something you just never discussed. It was there in the community, everybody knew, but nobody really talked about it. But you know...to me, the students are the key to getting Tar Creek...cleaned up or improved or whatever is going to happen (Personal interview).

The Tar Creek story demonstrates how service-learning, in a context rich with academic content, can be used to both teach and practice active citizenship. Last year, the governor of Oklahoma formed the Tar Creek Task Force to investigate the environmental problems. A major statewide newspaper, The Daily Oklahoman, gave these students credit for getting the story on his radar screen. The students gave the governor an award for his initiative, and he came to the school to receive it. While there, he listened to the essays and poetry (pro and con) on moving two of the undermined towns, giving voice to affected youth.

All of these group projects build team spirit and a sense of the collective that crosses social and cultural differences and class boundaries. The many and varied activities contribute to the students’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities as democratic citizens. As we note in our more detailed accounting of this project (Kesson & Oyler, 1999), “teaching for moral decision-making and social responsibility, with complex community-based issues at the center, requires moral courage on the part of the teacher” (p. 147). There are many challenges and obstacles to overcome. We were impressed with the moral courage, integrity, passion and

commitment of these students, teachers, and community members working collaboratively on matters of genuine social concern. The Tar Creek story challenges us all to imagine the possibilities of an education committed to the development of democratic citizens.

The Crisis of Democracy

It is sometimes easy to forget that the United States of America is the world's first constitutional democracy. Barely 200 years old, we are still in the larger scheme of things an experiment. In the early days of the republic, America faced a particular historical challenge – that of educating citizens for the various roles that they would need to take in order to sustain a fragile new political system. Horace Mann, in 1846, argued that a system of education should be provided for all, at public expense, that would “qualify each citizen for the civil and social duties he (sic) will be called upon to discharge” (Mann, in Noddings, 2001, p. 174). Since these early conceptualizations of the public school, an important educational imperative in America has been the education of students as citizens. Educating for democracy in these first two centuries of our nation's life has been fraught with conflicts over the meaning of democracy, what it means to be a citizen, and what skills, attitudes and concepts are necessary in order to educate people for active participation in public life.

The United States now faces some new historical challenges. Many contemporary factors point to a “crisis of democracy” (Trend, 1996). These include the decline of voter participation, the growing gap between rich and poor, the globalization of the economy, and the concentration of the media (McChesney, 1999), to mention just a few.

The crisis of democracy is connected to a well-documented sense that our communities are losing their coherence and meaning. Bellah et al (1985) point to individualism, isolation and fragmentation as root causes of the turn away from participation in public life. Robert Putnam, noted researcher on civil society and social capital, claims that “(t)here is striking evidence that the vibrancy of American civil society has notably declined over the past several decades” (1995, p. 65). Indicators of the interlocking crises of democracy, community, and civil society are paralleled by troubling studies showing that student knowledge of the responsibilities of citizenship and of political processes is alarmingly low (Hart Research Associates, 1989). Studies have found that students “do not see community participation as necessary for good citizenship, that they speak of their personal rights but not of the common good, that their notions of democracy are vague at best and often border on advertising slogans, that nationalism and authoritarian values are often preferable to democratic values, and that the only way they plan on participating in public decision-making is through voting” (Berman, 1997, p. 5). All of the studies conclude that if student apathy and cynicism about the political process continues unabated, our democracy is indeed at risk.

Like most crises, this one presents both dangers and opportunities. While we do not wish to underestimate the magnitude of this multi-faceted problem, we see signs of hope, both in renewed citizen activism and in the efforts many teachers are making to create opportunities for community service, political participation, and the development of skills that are crucial to active democratic citizenship. In the opening pages of this chapter we highlighted three schools that are, in very different ways, educating for active citizenship. In the remainder of the chapter, we will draw insights from these narratives to explore the role that schools have to play in responding to the “crisis of democracy.” We propose a list of dispositions and capacities important to the cultivation of active citizenship, and highlight some characteristics of schools that are educating students to meet the demands of a strong democracy (Barber, 1998).

The ideas in this chapter are based on a number of deeply held personal beliefs about the relationship between democracy and education. Since schools are the primary social institutions that have sustained contact with children throughout their formative years, we believe that they have a responsibility to educate students for active citizenship. Further, we believe that this is best accomplished not just through a few isolated lessons in civics, but through a comprehensive approach that includes attention to curriculum, instructional practices, governance, school culture and structures, relationships, and opportunities to practice civic learning in real life situations. We believe that schools need to be inclusive, in that they welcome differences as valuable opportunities for practicing the skills of citizenship and community building. We believe that schools should be places where all students find their voice and are empowered to participate in public life. And we believe that schools should foster the sorts of face-to-face interactions, within and without the school walls, which are necessary to the building of strong communities, a vibrant civil society, and a strong democracy.

Differing conceptions of democracy.

Democracy, according to Robert Hoffert (2001), encompasses a “chaos of meanings.” “When we embrace ‘democracy,’ we do not make our lives easier or clearer; we take on an engagement of demanding responsibilities, perplexing possibilities, and paradoxical choices” (p. 39). We want to elaborate briefly on this complexity in order to develop our argument for more sustained attention to the teaching of democratic ideas and practices in schools.

Though most democratic ideas are subject to debate, one that is generally accepted is the concept of individual human worth.¹ Two value commitments emerge from this primary orientation to the value of every human being. The first is the concept of freedom: the primary responsibility of government in a democratic state is to “establish and maintain a fair and secure order in which individuals can maximally pursue their self-defining activities” (Hoffert, 2001, p. 34). The second value is the commitment to the fundamental equality of all beings. The tension between liberty and equality is the source of much of our political conflict. One example of this tension between liberty and equality is the Civil Rights movement of the 1950’s and 60’s. During this time, the freedom of southern whites to maintain a system of apartheid, protected under local statutes and states’ rights, conflicted with the demand, by American blacks and white sympathizers, for equal rights. Although equality eventually won the day in the form of legislation granting rights to black Americans, this tension is still apparent in policy debates over issues such as affirmative action. Claiming the universality of human worth does not mean that we have always lived up to this value; rather it is “a high and demanding standard by which (modern democracy) can be legitimately challenged and disciplined and to which it must be unrelentingly educated” (Hoffert, 2001, p. 29).

In addition to the tensions between deeply held values in democracy, there are differing conceptions of what it means to be a democratic citizen. To some people it means the right to vote periodically in elections to choose people who will represent them in various governing bodies, such as state and national legislatures. To others it signifies a more active and direct participation in the many decisions that affect our lives. These differing conceptions of democracy are contrasted in the following chart:

¹ A major exception to this value might come from the “deep ecologists” who question the “anthropocentrism” of liberal humanistic values. They might argue that the “human-centeredness” of the value of individual worth is responsible for ecological destruction, and argue instead for a greater appreciation for the inherent value, worth, and rights of *all* species. In some ways, however, this commitment could be considered consistent with a general trend in democracy towards the extension of rights to ever-widening spheres.

<p style="text-align: center;">Private democracy</p> <p>A tradition stemming from the philosophy of John Locke and later James Madison. Emphasizes property rights and “possessive individualism” (Sehr, 1997)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Public democracy</p> <p>A minority strand in American democratic thought associated with Thomas Jefferson. Emphasizes an engaged public involved in the affairs of government (Sehr, 1997)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Procedural democracy</p> <p>Emphasizes the basic principles usually taught in civics classes: majority rule, due process, etc.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Deliberative democracy</p> <p>Emphasizes free inquiry and debate over issues, aims at consensus</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Formal democracy</p> <p>Emphasizes voting, and participation in government through elected representatives</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Deep democracy</p> <p>Emphasizes democracy as a way of life characterized by empathy, equity, commitment, and connection (Green, 1999)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Weak democracy</p> <p>Citizens as consumers of government services, voters, and passive watchdogs to whom representatives are minimally accountable</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Strong democracy</p> <p>Citizens as active, responsible, engaged members of groups and communities who participate in public affairs (Barber, 1998)</p>

As you can see, the conceptions of democracy on the left hand side of the chart represent a “minimalist” approach to democracy. Those on the right emphasize a more active, engaged participation. According to David Sehr (1997), current dominant conceptions of democracy are “oriented chiefly toward individual, private economic activity as the fulfillment of the promise of democracy... (and favor) low levels of popular democratic participation and a withering of the public sphere” (p. 18). We believe that in order to fulfill the promise of democracy, we must move consistently toward increased, not decreased citizen participation in public affairs.

Moving from the currently dominant forms of private, procedural, formal, and weak democracy to the more robust participation suggested by public, deliberative, deep, and strong democracy implies an extension of rights and responsibilities to more and more citizens, many of whom have been marginalized or excluded in the past. It also extends democratic practices to other cultural sites (from the voting booth into the workplace, the community, the school, the home). Strong democracy requires a much higher level of participation and a deeper level of engagement with public issues.

Beyond this, the shift toward a strong democracy will require a deep understanding of the moral dimension of democracy. With John Dewey, America’s most well known philosopher, we want to advocate for a democracy that is “more than a government structure; it is a way of life

that is extensively varied, communicative, and participatory” (Snauwert, 1993, p. 53). Or as a more contemporary theorist of democracy says,

Deep democracy would equip people to expect, to understand, and to value diversity and change while preserving and projecting both democratically humane cultural values and interactively sustainable environmental values in a dynamic, responsive way. Existentially, deep democracy would reconnect people in satisfying ways (Green, 1999, p. xiv).

The moral dimension of democracy emphasizes the public interest over the private good, and requires a commitment to democracy that is strong, deliberative, deep, and participatory. What do all these conditions have in common? They all signify empowerment—citizens assuming democratic control over aspects of their lives previously deferred to experts and elected representatives. They also signify a democracy that is developmental—that is, devoted to the growth and development of each and every one of its members. John Dewey believed that the importance of democratic social institutions was in their capacity to support and promote the full and free development of human powers. Influenced by Darwin, Dewey defined growth as successful adaptation to a changing environment. This adaptation requires a certain kind of reflective intelligence in a context of human association. Snauwert (1993) reminds us of the importance of sociability in Dewey’s philosophy:

We are born and live our lives in association with others. Thus, human associations form our primary environments. Being primary, the quality of human association is the fundamental determining factor in our development. The quality and nature of social arrangements determine the moral and intellectual development of the individual (p. 51).

The importance of sociability to both intellectual development and citizenship will figure prominently in our discussion of education and democracy.

Are we prepared for a shift to such a vigorous, deep democracy? In one study, upper division college students were asked to list the most important citizenship skills they learned throughout their educational experiences. They invariably listed the five same “skills”: vote, obey the law, pay taxes, salute the flag, and say the Pledge of Allegiance (Andrzejewski, 1999, p. 3). These citizenship skills are appropriate for what we have called a “weak democracy.” We want to suggest here that this narrow, passive version of citizenship education is inadequate to prepare students for a complex, turbulent, and pluralistic democracy, especially one characterized by “a crisis of meaning” (Trend, 1996). We believe with Thomas Jefferson (Sehr, 1997), with John Dewey (1927), with Benjamin Barber (1998) with Judith Green (1999), and with other “strong democrats” that the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy. But a strong democracy does not take shape automatically, nor does it sustain itself naturally. Education is essential to the cultivation of democratic character, all the more so in an era of extreme individualism, consumption, and privatized interests. If we lived in a society that was just and compassionate, fair and equitable, and dedicated to the development of the full human potential of its members, we would have no need of an education designed to develop democratic character. But given the scope of the crisis in democracy and the more complete definition of citizenship that we are developing in this paper, the times demand a more intentional approach:

Democratic citizenship without democratic character cannot meet the requirements of a healthy democracy. Once this is understood, the purpose of education in a democratic society becomes clear: to prepare an informed, thoughtful, and creative citizenry for active and critical participation in a

democracy, while simultaneously creating and sustaining a just and caring social environment, and ensuring that the very best educational offerings are available fully and equally to all members of that society (Goodlad, 2001, pp. 84-85).

We think that this articulation by Goodlad of the purpose of education in a democratic society captures the essential elements of our argument. Schools, following the family, are the sites where most people learn to be social. It is in school where most of us learn to share, to get along, to communicate, and to work together, the fundamentals of a deep democracy. So it is to this institution, the school, that we turn our attention now.

Democracy and Schooling

The commitment to educating citizens for life in a complex democracy was most completely worked out by progressive educators in the early part of the twentieth century. Since the history of education is not a very prominent aspect of teacher education, many people working in schools are unaware that such seemingly modern instructional practices such as thematic, integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, heterogeneous grouping, and developmentally appropriate practices have their origins in the democratic, problem-centered, core curricula advocated by early progressive educators (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 4). Scholars and educators of that time, such as John Dewey, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Caroline Pratt, Harold Rugg, Theodore Brameld, William Kilpatrick, and George Counts promoted student participation in school governance, the notion of the school as a community, and direct student engagement in public life (Berman, 1997). If these are not familiar names to contemporary educators, then our profession is not benefiting from the collective wisdom of the past.

These progressive educators were all committed to the idea of democracy as a moral way of living. Education in a democracy is a profoundly moral undertaking. If we take as a guiding principle the concept that unites all the differences in a democracy – the fundamental worth of each and every human being – then the development of each of them to their fullest extent is the moral challenge of the public schools. Indeed, educating for democracy is almost synonymous with educating for moral development. “Without a moral framework” asserts Stephen Goodlad, “there can be no such thing as democratic character, or indeed, democracy” (p. 76). Kohlberg (1996), a leading researcher of moral development, concluded that civic, or political development was essentially a progression of increasingly complex moral thinking about the awareness of rights and principles of justice fundamental to our Constitution. Feminist scholars such as Nel Noddings (1984) and Carol Gilligan (1982) have tempered this assertion with reminders that the “ethic of care” is as important as the ‘ethic of justice’ in moral development. As you have seen, we have incorporated both standards in our title to demonstrate our sense of the equal importance of these positions.

An education for democracy in the 21st century must take into account the increasingly complex context of democratic societies. As educators, we need to educate ourselves about the challenges to democracy, a few of which were mentioned earlier. We need to understand what it means to be a “global citizen”, what it means to live in balance with the earth’s ecosystems, and how to negotiate the differences of race, class, ethnicity, language, culture, sexuality, ability and disability, and age in a way that deepens democracy. “Diversity plus common interests”, according to Walter Parker, “compose the bedrock of a democracy strong enough to cope with modernity” (1996, p. 6). We must overcome culturally and biologically instilled habits such as ethnocentricity, geo-centricity, inclusion/exclusion, self-interest and self-preservation that have separated us and kept humanity from forging the common bonds necessary for the development of the universally enjoyed “good society.” Schools are potentially ideal sites for democratic

education, but this intention, according to Walter Parker, “has not been undertaken seriously as a curricular project” (p. 11). We have failed to take advantage of the naturally occurring diversity in schools to take up the challenge of working out the practices of democratic living.

Why have schools failed to take full advantage of the mandate to educate for what we like to call “compassionate citizenship” (citizenship devoted not merely to private gain, but to the common good)? Many scholars point to two educational imperatives that often conflict: the expectation that schools will prepare students for economic roles in a competitive society, and the expectation that they will educate for democratic citizenship (Brosio, 1994; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Katz, 1971; Carnoy, 1982). There is a fair amount of historical evidence, for example, that such taken-for-granted aspects of schooling as the ringing of bells between classes, testing, the standardization of the curriculum, and the sifting and sorting of students into ability groups were designed to prepare people for work in a stratified economic system (Anyon, 1980). There is also ample evidence that many of these schooling practices have tended to reproduce the existing social order, and to preserve the privilege of elite classes and groups. Indeed, many current practices, such as the segregation of children according to ability or behavior, are anti-democratic, if not in intention, then in result. In the book, Schooling Children with Down Syndrome: Toward an Understanding of Possibility (1998), Chris Kliewer demonstrates over and over that “such marginalization works against the very preparation for democratic living and full participation in civic life that is the right of all citizens” (Oyler, 2001, p. 66). Anti-democratic practices run counter to the ideal of a meritocracy—the myth that America is a level playing field, and that because of equal educational opportunity, everyone has an equal chance to succeed. People concerned with making the ideals of meritocracy and democracy a reality focus on educational reforms that are inclusive, that empower students, and that distribute power and resources more equitably.

You will find that many of the ideas in this book, though certainly not incompatible with educating students to find meaningful and productive work in our society, are primarily concerned with educating students for full and active participation in their communities and in the larger society. They are designed to foster positive face-to-face interactions, cooperation, conflict resolution, creative thinking and problem-solving, and emotional and social literacy—all important skills for living in a developmental democracy.

Different Approaches to Citizenship Education

People of good will differ on how best to educate for democratic citizenship. Below, we highlight some of the main approaches that have been used, and discuss some of the benefits and limitations of each.

Academic content. This is the view that students develop into productive citizens through engagement with a rigorous, traditional (discipline-based) academic curriculum. According to Diane Ravitch, one of the proponents of this point of view, “democratic society itself is dependent upon the judgments of a majority, which suggests that everyone benefits by disseminating reason, knowledge, and civic wisdom as broadly as possible” (2000, p.462). Though we agree with the ideal that “high-status” knowledge should be widely available and accessible to all, we wish to point out the obvious problems with a curriculum that is unrelated to student interests or concerns. To teach the academic disciplines without attention to the issues of student motivation, learning styles, and the multiplicity of “intelligences” is to ignore Dewey’s assertion that “the child and the curriculum are simply two limits that define a single process” (1964, p. 344).

Though we would agree with theorists such as Paul Gagnon (1989) that an in-depth exposure to history and the humanities, for example, is crucial to the development of democratic citizenship, we also worry that advocates of the academic content approach often present a one-sided view of history and culture. One of the most prominent advocates of this “liberal traditionalism” (Ravitch, 2000, p. 464) is E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1996) who has attempted to define the “canon”—what all students should know about Western culture—grade by grade. Critics of E.D. Hirsch’s work point out that his canon privileges a particular (white, male, European, Christian, elite) cultural experience over a more diverse and representative set of perspectives. These serious concerns with the academic content perspective do not diminish our interest in ensuring that all students, regardless of their perceived capacities, abilities, social class, or limited language skills, should have access to a curriculum rich in content.

Instillation of loyalty and patriotism. One school of thought popular in the 19th century, and still dominant in some circles has as its main premise that “despite recurring problems and inequalities, the United States is and has been a democratic and humane society, in many ways the last and best hope for freedom and justice in the world” (Marciano, 1997, p. 31). Intellectuals such as Mortimer Adler (1987), William Bennett (1988), and Allan Bloom (1987) believe that students need exposure to the ideas of the Founding Fathers and the lofty ideals, such as duty, discipline, loyalty, obedience, and patriotism that have shaped our country. They acknowledge that there have been conflicts and contradictions along the way, but underemphasize our tragic past: the genocidal destruction of the indigenous people who were here before European colonizers, a system of slavery that lasted over a century, the suppression of women’s political rights until 1920, the racism that blocked the achievements of African Americans until passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the exploitation of working people (Marciano, 1997). In his important work, Civic Illiteracy and Education, John Marciano documents the ways in which this approach to education indoctrinates youth, contributes to “historical amnesia” (1997, p. 196), and inhibits the development of critical thinking.

While we believe that attention to the ideals on which our society was founded—the ideals of liberty, equality, justice and rights—is important, we believe that democracy is very much a “work-in-progress,” and that it is students’ active engagement with such ideals, not merely an academic acquaintance with them, that will influence their growth as citizens. And we agree with Marciano, Howard Zinn (1980) and Ronald Takaki (1993) who argue for the inclusion of diverse perspectives and a more honest and critical appraisal of our history.

Study of how governments work. This approach equates politics with what governments and politicians do and understands the role of citizens as limited to voting or advocating for a particular interest or cause (Mathews, 1996, p. 270). A review of this type of civics education can be found in the CIVITAS report (Quigley & Bahmueller, 1991), published by the Council for Advancement of Citizenship and the Center for Civic Education. Some of the materials in this report assume that public apathy about politics is a sign of widespread satisfaction with the government.

Although we believe that it is important to understand the workings of power and decision-making, we believe that this approach to educating for democratic citizenship in itself encourages “weak democracy.” However, when coupled with an active engagement with significant issues, as in our narrative of the students involved in the clean-up of Tar Creek, the study of the way that governments work is a crucial component in citizenship education.

Critical thinking and moral reasoning. Both the Second World War, with its fight against fascism, and the Cold War, with its fight against communism, alerted educators and policy makers to the need to educate students about how to resist propaganda. We “put our faith in ‘critical thinking’, meaning the ability to see through the manipulative arguments of our oppressors” (Mathews, 1996, p. 267). It was recognized that all political decisions were grounded in a particular set of values, so great attention was given to understanding the values of a democratic society. One aspect of this curricular intervention was called “values clarification”, a movement that generated its own heated controversies. Kohlberg (1996) and others promoted the idea that good civic education was the “stimulation of development of more advanced patterns of (moral) reasoning about political and social decisions and their implementation in action” (p. 211). Our narrative about the students in Barre Town Middle Elementary School, engaged in the problem-solving through literature curriculum, demonstrates one innovative way that students’ capacities for moral reasoning are developed. What is most important about this example is that the students have opportunities to take action consistent with their emergent insights.

Through the 1970’s and 1980’s, there was less interest in agreeing on a core set of American values than there was in coming to terms with diversity, teaching creative uses of conflict, and conflict resolution. The students at Harmony School, in the context of their democratic Family Meetings, have many opportunities to experiment with exchanging differing viewpoints, engaging in creative conflict resolution, and arriving at consensus. In a strong democracy, citizens are called upon to work together to solve common problems, and we agree that critical thinking, reflective judgment, moral/and ethical reasoning, and conflict resolution are crucial to such efforts.

Direct experience in civic and political activity. Perhaps the most controversial of all the approaches, this approach assumes, and many studies suggest, that students who experience active engagement with community service and direct political action are more likely to engage in civic activity later on in life (Berman, 1997, p.144-45). Berman notes a number of assumptions held by educators who advocate for this more active approach to civics learning. One is that students are not merely preparing for later citizenship, they are citizens now. Although they possess limited formal powers and privileges, they are quite capable of making genuine contributions to the welfare of their communities and the world. The second assumption, echoing Dewey’s theory of experiential learning, is that genuine learning requires action to test the efficacy of one’s theories about the world. A third assumption is that “students who are given greater responsibility develop a greater sense of responsibility” (p. 145). Research on thirty experiential education programs that included service-learning or community-based activity showed marked increases in student self-esteem, social competence, moral reasoning and social efficacy (p. 145-146).

The most effective programs included a reflective component, so students could share their learning in discussions with other students. This last point reflects our opinion that experiential learning activities, while valuable in themselves, are strengthened by both a strong academic as well as a reflective component. Students volunteering at a homeless shelter or at a food distribution program benefit much more in terms of cognitive development if their curriculum includes a focus on the root causes of hunger and homelessness, and if they have

ample opportunities to “process” what they are learning both in terms of their first hand experiences and their encounter with rich academic content:

There is evidence to suggest ample reflection can aid service-learning students in developing a moral language for describing their commitments and responsibilities to the larger society and assist them in developing “networks of engagement” with others outside of their families and immediate peer groups (Koliba, 2000, p. 836)

Our Tar Creek narrative is perhaps the richest example we have found of citizenship education that is comprehensive; that is, including strong academic content, active engagement in political or civic activity, and meaningful reflection. Its success is indicated by the fact that it appears to be sustainable (the project has been on-going for seven years now, despite changes in the student and teacher population, and the school has recently been chosen as a Leader School in Oklahoma for its admirable work in environmental education).

All of the approaches mentioned above have something important to contribute to educating for democratic citizenship. But the criteria for assessing worthy curricula and instructional methods change if we are interested in educating for a democracy that is strong, deep, deliberative, public, and participatory. If you remember our earlier discussion, we noted that one characteristic of a modern democracy is its experimental nature. Unlike more traditional societies, which are governed by custom and authoritative knowledge, modern democracies place a premium on invention and experimentation. In a modern, experimental, participatory democracy, the ability to identify and work towards the solution of problems is an on-going task of democratic citizens. Whether community members are involved in cleaning up a toxic waste dump, or figuring out how to meet the needs of the homeless in their midst, or how to provide themselves affordable health care, it is necessary to work toward the solution of problems. Working together to solve problems is a social act; it is also a creative act. This sort of creative problem-solving characterizes the behavior of citizens in a strong democracy.

Progressive educators, both historically and today, suggest that a democratic education should be problem-focused. Merely teaching facts from the academic disciplines is inadequate for a number of reasons. First, research on the brain demonstrates that we learn best when information is embedded in a context (Caine & Caine, 1991). It is equally important that this context be relevant to the lives of students. People learn best when they find personal meaning in a topic. And knowledge is best absorbed when students have a chance to apply it to new situations. As the research on the standard civics curriculum shows, it has historically had little effect on either political attitudes or efficacy (Berman, 1997, p.147). Democratic dispositions and capacities need to be cultivated, and students need to have opportunities to practice them in multiple and recurring situations.

Dispositions and Capacities Necessary for a Strong Democracy

We are using the word disposition to refer to a habitual tendency or inclination. One could be well educated about the history of the United States, be inculcated with the values essential to a free society, know the way that government works, be trained in critical thinking, and still not have the inclination to engage in collaborative problem-solving behavior. In addition to dispositions, there are a number of capacities, or skills that students need to attain in order to engage in “public problem-solving.” We believe that these skills are best cultivated in an educational setting. The dispositions and capacities that we believe are most crucial to the development of active citizenship are encapsulated in the following chart.

Dispositions

Sense of connectedness, understands the importance of relationships and sociability

Sense of fairness and justice

Recognition of the fundamental equality of all people

Care and concern for both friends and strangers

Acceptance of difference

Interested in public problem-solving

Desire to collaborate and work together to solve problems

Willingness to take the perspective of another

Open-mindedness – the willingness to incorporate new information into prior conceptual schema

Capable of modifying beliefs in light of new experience and information

Self-confidence and the desire for efficacy

Freedom from fear of conflict

A sense of humor

Capacities

Ability to develop logical arguments

Ability to write and speak coherently and persuasively

Ability to think critically and utilize the tools of logic (recognizing hasty generalizations and faulty arguments, weighing evidence and evaluating truth claims)

Ability to question the motivations and interests underlying points of view, and detect bias

Ability to listen actively and respond empathetically to the varied perspectives and opinions of others

Ability to deliberate, negotiate, and dialogue across differences

Ability to think imaginatively and come up with creative solutions

Ability to work together collaboratively and appreciate the varied skills and talents that others bring to a situation

Ability to “stand outside” one’s own value system, and understand it as socially constructed

Ability to apply concepts to real life situations

Ability to make decisions that foster the “common good”, not just private gain

Clearly these dispositions and capacities are developmental. While we believe they can all be fostered from the earliest ages, they are designed to come to fruition as students approach adulthood. However, they must be consciously nurtured and supported throughout a student's entire education.

Dispositions and capacities embody cognitive and affective "processes." The emphasis on process is by no means meant to minimize the importance of "content." The false process/content divide has too often been used as a way to discredit progressive educational practices. A curriculum based on collaborative problem-solving must be rich in content. Students engaged in political activism to clean up the pollution in Tar Creek approached their problem through multiple disciplines: geology, chemistry, economics, English literature, health, anatomy and physiology, biology and environmental science, to mention just a few. The "difference that makes a difference" in this case is that the disciplinary knowledge was not presented in an abstract, decontextualized way, but was brought in to inform their efforts to solve a set of meaningful problems in a real-life context.

Characteristics of Democratic Schools

Following Dewey, progressive educators see the classroom as a microcosm of society, with many possibilities for developing the dispositions and capacities necessary for active citizenship. In contrast to a classroom organized around competitive self-interest, the democratic classroom attempts to emulate the "loving and just community." "Care, trust, and responsibility are important norms...members...develop common values, goals, and a sense of collective responsibility...(and) conflicts become group opportunities for ethical problem-solving" (Berman, 1997, p. 131).

The development of democratic dispositions and capacities can not take place in a vacuum. Thus, the issue of school culture becomes an important consideration. Various studies suggest that "a higher level of institutional justice is a condition for individual development of a higher sense of justice" (Kohlberg, 1996, p. 216). Some of the criteria for assessing the level of institutional justice in a school include (but are not limited to):

- Are the rules and regulations considered fair?
- Do students participate in rule setting?
- How are rewards, punishments, and privileges distributed?
- Do all students have opportunities to participate in governance?
- Are there fair and equitable processes in place for conflict resolution?
- Do students and teachers collaborate on curricular decisions?
- Are students with varied capacities and abilities encouraged to work together on projects of mutual concern?
- Is there a rich curriculum, accessible to all, with appropriate modifications and adaptations to differing student abilities?

The Harmony School, documented more extensively in the book Elementary Schooling for Critical Democracy (Goodman, 1992), provides one of the most interesting case studies of an entire school culture organized around democratic principles and institutional justice. There are other extraordinary models of democratic school culture. Many of these are unsung, some are documented in books such as Democratic Schools (Apple & Beane, 1995). There are no "formulas" for creating democratic schools and classrooms. Each situation, depending on differences in the students, teachers, and community, will be unique. David Sehr (1997) lists

some characteristics of school life that are likely to lead to students' engagement with a program of educating for strong democracy. These are:

- An atmosphere in which students feel a sense of belonging or membership in the school community
- A feeling of students' safety, both physical and emotional/psychological
- Schoolwork with intrinsic interest for students
- Schoolwork that is meaningful not only for school purposes, but also in the real world outside school
- A sense of ownership of their school

Sehr also provides us with a list of school practices that nurture public democratic values and attributes. His list is consistent with the practices that we believe are essential to the creation and maintenance of a democratic school. They are:

- Creating opportunities for students to explore their interdependence with others and with nature
- Encouraging study of issues of equality and social justice
- Encouraging discussion, debate, and action on public issues
- Encouraging students to examine and evaluate critically the social reality in which they live
- Developing students' capacities for public democratic participation

All of the above characteristics and practices are designed to foster a school culture that supports students' development as active, democratic citizens. In one review of the relationship between schooling and political socialization, a strong, if not conclusive link was found between decision-making participation in school governance and the development of democratic political values:

The evidence is fairly convincing that there may be relationships between school organization and governance climate and student political attitudes and behavior (Ehman, cited in Berman, p. 125).

Given this "convincing evidence", we think it is important to maximize the opportunities for students to participate in the many decisions that affect their school life: schedules, curriculum, governance, rules and regulations, and assessment. And given that students learn much through the "hidden curriculum", we want to emphasize the importance of creating a school culture in which teachers, staff, and administrators model, in their relationships and practices, the very dispositions and capacities that we hope to develop in students. Perhaps most important, we believe that students should be presented with many opportunities throughout their school careers to engage in meaningful, problem-focused activities, both within and without the schools walls.

Conclusion

Schools can not solve the problems of democracy. In many ways, they are microcosms of the wider society, and will necessarily reflect the dominant interests, concerns, and moral commitments of the times. Teachers, however, have a historic mission to educate students for active participation in their society. Sometimes this means having to "teach against the grain" of the existing social order. We hope we have interested you in the idea of democracy as a moral way of living, and illuminated some ways that attention to curriculum, school culture, instructional practices, and opportunities for reaching outside the boundaries of the school walls can foster the capacities and dispositions students need to become active, compassionate citizens. We hope that you will experiment with some of the many ideas in this book for creating caring, collaborative, creative, and democratic classrooms. We believe that students fortunate enough to

have such educational experiences are likely to develop an interest in strong democracy, and to be creators of the loving and just society that we all hope for.

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Acknowledgements

The research on Harmony School was carried out by Kate Paxton, graduate research assistant with the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont, with funding provided by the Josephine Bay and Michael Paul Foundation. The research on the Barre Town Middle Elementary School was carried out by Carolyn Shapiro, research associate with the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont, with funding

provided by the Josephine Bay and Michael Paul Foundation and the Corporation for National Service. The research on Tar Creek was carried out by Kathleen Kesson, Director of the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education and Celia Oylar, Teachers College, and was supported by an Untenured Faculty Research Grant from the Dean's Office at Teachers College.