

Selected, Edited, and with Issue Framing Material by:
Glenn L. Koonce, *Regent University*

ISSUE



Are Truly Democratic Classrooms Possible?

YES: Lina Bell Soares, from "The Education Students Deserve: Building a Democratic Classroom in Teacher Education," *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* (2013)

NO: Gary K. Clabaugh, from "Second Thoughts about Democratic Classrooms," *Educational Horizons* (2008)

Learning Outcomes

After reading this issue, you will be able to:

- Define and describe a democratic classroom.
- Analyze and describe internal and external factors that shape democratic classrooms.
- Explore how schools are a reflection of society.
- Identify the closest challenges to democratic education.
- Gain an understanding of the role of federal government in democratic education.

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Lina Soares, Associate Professor of Education, draws from John Dewey and literature related to social justice and critical multicultural education as a way to practice democracy in the classroom.

NO: Gary K. Clabaugh, Professor of Education, examines such factors as top-down management, compulsory attendance, business world influences, and federal mandates to declare Morrison's ideas to be "out of touch" with reality.

Certainly everyone would agree that one of the primary aims of education is to produce citizens capable of effectively participating in their society. The controversial aspect of this aim resides in determining the best way of carrying it out. In recent years educators and theorists have renewed a basic question that has been discussed for over a hundred years, namely "Is it possible to produce democratic citizens if the schooling the young are subjected to is clearly undemocratic?"

As Charles C. Haynes, in "Schools of Conscience," *Educational Leadership* (May 2009), states, "We need schools that actually practice what their civics classes are supposed to teach. . . . At a time when the United States faces unprecedented challenges at home and abroad, public

schools must do far more to prepare young people to be engaged, ethical advocates of 'liberty and justice for all.'" Haynes contends that education's highest aim is to create moral and civic habits of the heart. This central purpose was articulated by the early leaders of American education. Thomas Jefferson made the principles of democratic government an essential element in the free public education of the general citizenry. Horace Mann's common school was dedicated to producing people able to critically judge the political and social needs of the nation. Waves of European immigrants in the nineteenth century prompted a new emphasis on socialization strategies and the development of patriotism. As Joel Spring has pointed out in his book *Conflict of Interests*, "In a totalitarian society it is possible to teach a single interpretation of the laws

and government in the public schools, but in a society such as that of the United States, which fosters a variety of political beliefs . . . , attempts to teach principles of government can result in major political battles."

In "Civic Education and Political Participation," *Phi Delta Kappan* (September 2003), William A. Galston declares that school-based civic education has been in decline over recent decades. He claims that every significant indicator of political engagement among the young has fallen. Community service programs in high schools are on the increase, but there is no evidence that such "mandatory volunteerism" leads to wider civic participation. He states that "the surge of patriotic sentiment among young people in the immediate wake of September 11th has not yielded a comparable surge in engaged, active citizenship."

If the school atmosphere is by design, by tradition, or by habit undemocratic, can truly democratic citizens emerge? Haynes states that "to prepare students to be ethical, engaged citizens we must give them . . . meaningful opportunities to practice freedom responsibly in a school culture that encourages shared decision-making. . . . In short we need schools that actually practice . . . freedom and democracy, not censorship and repression."

Similarly, Marion Brady, in "Cover the Material—Or Teach Students to Think?" *Educational Leadership* (February 2008), claims that students need to tackle issues straight out of the complex world in which they live. "A focus on real-world issues . . . enables students and teachers to experience the 'meatiness' of the direct study of reality. . . . It shows respect for students, who become more than mere candidates for the next higher grade. . . . It disregards the arbitrary, artificial boundaries of the academic disciplines."

In "Democracy and Education: Empowering Students to Make Sense of Their World," *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 2008), William H. Garrison contends that the best learning happens under a truly democratic system in which students assume the freedom and responsibility to make choices and direct their learning experiences. His ideas certainly reflect the basic philosophy of John Dewey and the sentiments of John Holt.

In the articles presented here Lina Bell Soares aligns herself with those in the field who feel that preoccupation with rising test scores is hurting authentic learning experiences. Gary Clabaugh argues that public schools generally lag behind society. Therefore, "Democratic Classrooms" are likely unattainable.



YES **Lina Bell Soares**

The Education Students Deserve: Building a Democratic Classroom in Teacher Education

Introduction

In 1916, Dewey postulated that democratic schools provide the foundation for students to actively participate in a democratic way of life, and to do so, the educational curriculum must be structured to engage students in authentic real-life experiences that will empower them to maintain such a way of life beyond schools' walls. Yet, scholars who have studied through varied theoretical lens (Apple & Beane, 2007; Giroux, 1988, 1989; Goodlad, 1984; Greene, 2000; Meier, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ravitch, 2010) assert that US public schools today are more concerned about the production of proficient test scores on state-mandated standardized tests than putting democracy into practice. Further, the consensus among these scholars is that the culture of high-stakes testing in which public schools now function under the guise of educational reform has led the US school system into troubled times and far removed from democratic ideals. In the name of reform, one wonders if this is what Dewey envisioned for democratic schools; equality achieved through a single test score.

Kahne and Middaugh (2006) maintain that participation in democracy "does not occur instinctively nor does it develop organically. Educators have a role to play—helping students in thinking carefully. . ." (p. 607). Correspondingly, teacher educators have a role to play—a role that permits preservice teachers to explore pedagogies that lead to a more social justice-oriented curriculum and develop dispositions to teach with tolerance. Further, teacher educators must empower their preservice teachers to become caring participants in their society. From this author's perspective, a good place to begin is through the implementation of democratic practices in their teaching.

In an era of high-stakes testing in US schools, it becomes necessary to engage preservice teachers in critical conversations that will sharpen their sensibilities toward societal problems in their world and ultimately remove social inequities in their classrooms. A plethora

of research has found that young adult literature is a good source of critical engagement because of the many prominent themes that are integral parts of content areas, such as conflict, ethical dilemmas, gender and race issues, environmental, and even violence (Harper & Bean, 2007). Moreover, researchers have found that young adult literature provides a vehicle to support critical literacy in the classroom (Bean & Harper, 2006; Bean & Moni, 2003; Behrman, 2006; Wolk, 2009). For certification seeking teachers in middle grade education, the adoption of strategic practices in critical literacy to enable discussions that center on relevant themes in the lives of young adolescents is essential to their development for future democratic classrooms. In conjunction, the adoption of a more social justice-oriented curriculum is crucial for teacher candidates in today's diverse society.

Drawing on Dewey (1916, 1938) and on literature related to social justice and critical multicultural education (Banks, 2004; Giroux, 1989; May & Sleeter, 2010; Sleeter, 2005), in this article, I present a framework of instructional practices I use to prepare my preservice middle grade teachers to challenge the status quo (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993) and teach for social change through an integration of young adult literature and critical literacy. I begin by offering reasons to examine controversial issues found in young adult literature, followed by a brief account of critical literacy, both the concept and pedagogy. Subsequently, I introduce a framework of critical literacy practices to establish a social justice-oriented curriculum. My purpose is twofold: 1) to teach middle grade preservice teachers how to establish a participatory democracy in their future classrooms; and 2) to prepare middle grade preservice teachers to foster fairness and justice with the lives they will one day influence.

Reasons to Teach Young Adult Literature

For diverse US classrooms, teacher educators who work with content area preservice teachers in middle grade edu-

cation must do more than teach content knowledge and instructional methods. In addition, we must introduce our students to the types of experiences that lead to critical conversations about current social and controversial issues that are relevant to content studies. One method that holds promise is to expose preservice teachers in middle grade education to challenging and contentious themes in young adult literature (Walker & Bean, 2005). By integrating young adult literature into preservice teachers' development, they are given the opportunity to become part of a larger discussion that lays the foundation for caring, respectful, tolerant, and empathetic classrooms (Bean & Harper, 2004; Harper & Bean, 2007). In fact, Busching and Slesinger (2002) explicate that literature is the vehicle by which students can explore their world by focusing on issues and concerns, such as identity, discrimination, sexuality, environmental issues, and war and violence. Furthermore, McDaniel (2004) posits that when preservice teachers read and experience the controversial topics explored in diverse texts, they become aware of the injustices in the textual world, the real world, and work toward changing their world to benefit mankind. Yet for preservice teachers to be sufficiently prepared to create a democratic classroom, they must adopt a questioning stance that can be achieved through the pedagogy of critical literacy.

Critical Literacy: The Concept and Pedagogical Practices

Experts in the field of reading agree that one salient aspect of reader response is to connect students' life experiences to texts (Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008; Rosenblatt, 1994; Sandman & Gruhler, 2007). However, response to literature requires connections beyond personal experiences. Critical literacy builds a foundation for students to engage in reader response activities that require them to read, analyze, question, and challenge all forms of text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). It is an active approach to reading that focuses on issues of power and social inequality. Teachers who practice critical literacy engage their students in various activities designed to give them opportunities to interrogate texts (Luke & Freebody, 1997), view multiple perspectives, create alternative versions of reality (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000), and then take action to put the new versions of reality into effect (Behrman, 2006). Accordingly, readers are taught to question authors' assumptions and beliefs, to question the voices heard and the voices that are silenced, and to find alternative ways to improve their world (Au, 2009; Banks, 2004; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Sleeter, 2005). In doing so, preservice teachers come to

know the fundamentals that promote a true democratic, participatory experience.

A Framework to Promote Democracy in the Classroom

As a professor of teacher education in the US, I want my preservice teachers to do more than demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective teaching. I want my students to restructure their curriculum and adopt pedagogy to foster fairness and create a democratic classroom culture of acceptance. From this perspective, I present a framework of four themes I have adapted from Ciardiello (2004): examining multiple perspectives, finding an authentic voice, recognizing social barriers, and finding one's identity to promote a participatory democratic classroom. It is important to note that Ciardiello's original framework includes a fifth theme—the call to service that provides an excellent foundation for service learning/ civic engagement projects. For purposes of this paper, I present each of the four themes in the context of young adult literature and critical literacy practices that I use with my preservice teachers.

Examining Multiple Perspectives

The theme of multiple perspectives is an important aspect of critical literacy because it teaches students that texts can have multiple meanings based on various viewpoints, beliefs, and values. The goal for classroom teachers is to help their students see that no single version tells the story (Au, 2009). There are always gaps and silences (Fairclough, 1989), as well as contradictions in telling the story. To introduce this important aspect of critical literacy, I engage my students in discussions that center on personal events, such as family disagreements or conflicts that may have occurred with professors and grades. I then have my students examine the power differential in each of the scenarios and to reflect on whose voices seemed to dominate the discussions, or whose voices were discounted or ignored. More importantly, I ask them to reflect on how they felt if perhaps the voice that had been marginalized or silenced had belonged to one of them, and I ask them if they had ever thought to question why. My goal is to raise their critical awareness by teaching them to question why their perspective was silenced, what role did power play, what affect did power have on their perspective, and what action could they have taken to change the outcome (Bean & Moni, 2003). By using questions such as these, Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) would posit that I am purposely

teaching my students to “question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice...” (p. 3). On a broader scale, I am providing the foundation for my students to begin to view the classroom as a society from which dialogue creates a space for constructing critical conversations about issues of social injustice.

Because critical literacy is about interrogating text and engaging in multiple perspectives, we examine many silenced voices—the silenced voices of fear, prejudice, gender bias, and discrimination that work to create the social injustices that are part of their world, and the world for many of today’s students. To achieve this objective, I encourage my students to explore the viewpoints that are not heard through young adult literature in order for my students to understand that power and perspective can marginalize or even silence voices that represent a different perspective in every story. For example, I have found that *Day of Tears* by Julius Lester (2005) is an excellent reading source to engage my developing teachers in critical conversations regarding different viewpoints and perspectives. The book is based on the largest slave auction in Savannah, Georgia in 1859 and is a moving story told through many dialogues and monologues from the perspective of the slaves, the slave owners, and the auctioneer.

Despite the pervasive racism throughout the story, the book is an excellent representation of the many voices needed to tell one of the darkest chapters in American history. The social inequities found in *Day of Tears* (Lester, 2005) provide the opportunity for preservice teachers to experience deeper thinking, such as power domination and silenced voices, while building social awareness and tolerance. By examining the feelings and identities of characters who have been ignored and whose lives have been marginalized, oppressed, or perceived to be inferior from the mainstream norm, they learn to appreciate the lives of others in their world who might otherwise be ignored (Gay, 2002). Furthermore, preservice teachers learn the value in creating a classroom culture that represents a multiplicity of perspectives so that every student is acknowledged as a vital member of the learning community (Sergiovanni, 2005).

Finding Authentic Voice

Ciardiello (2004) tells readers that the theme of finding one’s authentic voice in critical literacy is closely connected to the theme of multiple perspectives. In other words, as

students learn that texts often silence alternative perspectives, then students begin to understand there are voices missing behind those silenced perspectives. Critical literacy is a pedagogical tool that can encourage students to question issues of power and to challenge the forces that shape inequality and oppression in their world (Beck, 2005). Shor and Pari (1999) offer:

Critical literacy thus challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for social and self-development. This kind of literacy—words rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society—connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for reinventing our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity. (p. 1)

For young adolescents to use their “words to rethink their worlds,” it is important that preservice middle grade teachers understand the power of dialogue and the need to create experiences whereby their future students can interrogate societal issues and attempt to solve social injustices in their world. To assist my developing teachers, I engage my students in reading texts that address issues of democracy, freedom, equity, and social justice, whereby critical conversations about silenced voices and marginalized groups can grow into sharper focus. I further develop lessons based on dialogue in order for my preservice teachers to participate in critical conversations that examine the injustices of privileging one group over another because of social status, race, ethnicity, and religion, and how membership in one cultural group often defines opportunities or a lack thereof. While reading, I ask them to question whose voices are heard, whose voices are missing, why the author chose to favor or reject some characters, and how could they change the social conditions to give voice to the voiceless (Bean & Moni, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). These crucial conversations provide opportunities for my developing teachers to assume a critical stance, discover their voices, and more importantly, to foster a critical pedagogy that will help give voice to their future students’ lives.

One piece of young adult literature that I use is *Night* by Elie Wiesel (2006). The memoir is an intensely terrifying account of the brutality, the loss of family members, and the inhumane treatment of Jews the author witnessed during his time in Hitler’s death camps. The book is an incredible story because Wiesel vowed he would never revisit the personal horror. However, with encouragement from a French humanitarian, he finally broke his silence and wrote the story to speak for the six million Jews who will never speak again. A second good source of young

adult literature I use to teach the concept of voice is *Speak* (Anderson, 1999). The story revolves around the life of Melinda Sordino who is an outcast in her high school for calling the police on a summer party that turned ugly. She lives with a horrible secret that she was raped during the party and cannot bring herself to speak about the trauma with her family or friends. Through her love for art, she eventually regains her voice and confronts her attacker. Melinda's silence is a significant reminder of the shame and emotional paralysis that many students experience at the hands of other students and who withdraw from life because of oppressive forces surrounding them.

After reading, my students have rewritten parts of both texts through their own voices to record their feelings of desperation, isolation, and the belief that no one would listen. Additionally, they have been given the option to share their lived experiences aloud about times of personal pain. At times, I have invited my students to write song lyrics on important issues and themes in each novel to highlight their own unique voices. At times, I have my students develop interviews with a partner, one as the main character and one as the interviewer, to give the main character a voice to discuss lived experiences with someone who would listen.

Giroux (1989) explicated that "language is inseparable from lived experience and from how people create a distinctive voice" (p. 116). With each selection of young adult literature I use with my preservice students, the goal is to teach my students that the concept of voice is closely linked to everyday lived experiences. Therefore, if lived experiences are not free to be spoken, then student voices can be silenced. By reading young adult literature, preservice middle grade teachers begin to understand the forces in society that often work to marginalize and silence some members of society. The aim is for my preservice teachers to become more sensitive to what marginalized members of society have experienced and to understand the need to create a language of possibility (Giroux, 1997) for their future students.

Recognizing Social Barriers

Kornfeld and Prothro (2005) state that a classroom should be a "realm of possibility—a place in which teachers and students together examine their lived experiences and envision ways to enhance their lives and sense of efficacy in the world around them" (pp. 218-219). To be open to possibility, a classroom should be a positive learning community where all students are valued, supported, and feel a sense of belonging (Levine, 2003). Similarly, a positive learning community promotes a culture where

students are free from discrimination, ridicule, or exclusion. Ciardiello's (2004) third theme recognizes that harmful assumptions, negative stereotypes, and hurtful labels build social barriers that are divisive and counterintuitive to building a positive classroom culture. The theme of recognizing social barriers calls on teachers to bring young adolescents together by knocking down walls that separate, creating learning spaces where students can present different beliefs, values, and perspectives, and nurturing respect as caring participants in democracy.

To expand on the importance of this theme, I introduce my students to young adult literature that intentionally demonstrates how acceptance is often determined by cultural, ethnic, or class privilege. Our focus is to examine how prejudice is enacted by the dominant group. One piece of young adult literature that I frequently use is *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967). The story is told through the character of Ponyboy Curtis who lives with his older brothers due to the death of his parents. Throughout the novel, Ponyboy is confronted by class warfare and caught up in the bitter rivalry between the Greasers and the Socs, the nickname for Social. As a member of the Greasers, he continually faces walls of separation because of his lower social status until he is befriended by Cherry, a Soc. Through their friendship, the two teenagers realize they share many of the same dreams and fears that life can bring. Moreover, Pony Boy and Cherry portray two adolescents who let go of their misconceptions and unjust social assumptions by allowing their friendship to knock down the class barriers that segregated their lives.

For additional sources of reading, my students and I have read *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991) which is a story of Esperanza Cordero's life in the Latino quarter of Chicago. The book is an excellent example of how one family is relegated to a life of exclusion and lower class status because they do not speak English. To examine a similar theme of exclusion, we read *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000) which is a story of a young Mexican girl whose life is shattered when her father is killed. Esperanza and her mother flee to a migrant work camp in California during the Great Depression and begin a life of poverty, fear, and living with the stigma of an undocumented worker.

Both reading selections provide my students with a glimpse of what it is like to be viewed as an outsider from the dominant perspective where power and social status determine sociological categories of sub-dominant and marginal groups. Moreover, both books illustrate the barriers of separation from life's opportunities due to language and cultural differences that many outsiders face. Through meaningful interactions with young adult literature, my preservice teachers can begin to understand the need to

promote social action and knock down the walls that form barriers to learning in a democratic classroom.

Regaining One's Identity

Gee (2002) offered that identity is shaped in a situated context whereby individuals manifest certain beliefs, values, and behaviors in order to be a member of a social group. Unfortunately for many of today's young adolescents in middle grade classrooms, they struggle to form their true identities. Separated by differences in language, ethnicity, culture, and social status from the mainstream norm, many students are often marginalized in a classroom society (Gay, 2002). Nevertheless, Bishop's (1992) seminal study offered that literature can do more; "literature can act as a mechanism for the discussion and social transaction that will affect how children think about the world and children's response to literature can either validate or challenge their own ideology and world view" (p. 43). From this stance, I view young adult literature to be an agent of socialization; it is a mechanism whereby my preservice teachers can examine their implicit beliefs, attitudes, and identities while developing the knowledge of what a more just society would look like. The goal is for my preservice teachers to understand that a learning context is a society. Moreover, it must be an environment of trust that encourages adolescent identity development by signifying that each student is a significant and valued member of the classroom society.

To introduce the theme of identity, I often read aloud to my students the *Falcon and Frog: A Story of Flight from Identity and Return to Self* by Shahidi (2009). It is a delightful children's book that tells the story of how two friends help each other have the courage to be themselves and regain their identities. The message conveyed in this book is the importance of being true to oneself. The two characters in the story typify how acceptance or a lack thereof is often determined by social privilege and how prejudice is enacted by the dominant group because the two characters are judged not for whom they were on the inside, but by their outward appearance.

Before moving onto our text for this theme, I allow time for my students to share their stories when they have been the subject of others' ridicule or to recount times when they have observed others who were bullied because they were different and judged to be inferior by the dominant group. Through our discussions, we address the many sides of prejudice and the harmful effects to people's sense of selves. We then turn to our literature to read about an identity in conflict and how the conflict shapes the perception of self. *Monster* (Myers, 1999) is an excellent source to introduce my preservice teachers to the concept

of identity and the struggle to regain one's true self. The main character, Steve Harmon, has been arrested and is on trial for the murder of a Harlem store owner. In this story, Steve is found guilty by association and is accused of aiding and abetting the real murderer. As the story unfolds, Steve develops a screenplay based on his time in prison and the courtroom in an attempt to come to grips with his portrayal as a monster. He is eventually set free and lives by a new code of conduct.

From reading *Monster* (Myer, 1999), my preservice teachers gain a better understanding of how characters in conflict, struggle with their identities when their world is turned upside down (Harper & Bean, 2007). Young adult literature allows my students the opportunity to analyze their sense of selves within their world and examine the concept of identity by interpreting others' actions and practices (Hagood, 2002). In essence, they learn the importance of identity to a democratic classroom society they will one day create.

Returning to Dewey

More than seventy-five years ago, Dewey (1938) wrote, "[it is] the total social set-up of the situations in which a person is engaged that is most important in interpreting his or her experiences" (p. 45). Today, those experiences have been narrowed by a classroom culture of high-stakes standardized testing in the US and have unfortunate implications in public middle school classrooms. Middle grade classroom teachers and students alike are trapped in a curriculum of anti-democratic practices. The preoccupation of raising test scores is the norm for the classroom day and meaningful curriculum that embodies authentic learning experiences to enhance a democratic way of life has given way to only content that is tested. Yet, transformation of the classroom world does not occur overnight. It requires an active commitment to challenge and disrupt the commonplace activities and curricular structures that are firmly entrenched in today's schools that deny students from educational opportunities and social equality. From this perspective, those of us in teacher education in the US are on the frontline to enact real change and we can begin by asking ourselves: Is this the education students deserve?

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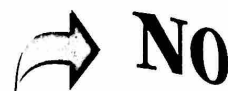
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LINA BELL SOARES is an Associate Professor of education at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia.





Gary K. Clabaugh

Second Thoughts about Democratic Classrooms

... **K**ristan A. Morrison's "Democratic Classrooms: Promises and Challenges of Student Voice and Choice" argues that students must experience autonomy, freedom, and choice if schools will ever be appealing and truly embody democracy. Those who found or find school tedious, oppressive, and uninteresting may be quick to agree, but how realistic is this proposal?

Cutting Costs with Mass Production

It has been well over one hundred years since America embarked on the ambitious venture of universal public schooling. The costs of this endeavor quickly became burdensome, and it was decided to model schools on factories and emphasize mass production and cost-effectiveness, rather than democracy or individuality.

For the most part, today's public schools still are factories. Management is top-down all the way. The federal government sets basic rules. State authorities implement the rules while adding many more. School boards make decisions based on federal and state rules plus fiscal and political realities. The superintendent executes the will of the board through his or her principals. They, in turn, tell teachers what to do and when to do it, and the teachers direct the youngsters in similar manner. Knowledge is fragmented and atomized. Children are compared to one another. Social and emotional development is neglected for more measurable outcomes. Economies of scale are sought at the expense of individuality. Teachers and students are managed.

Sometimes this industrial approach produces not only undemocratic, but peculiarly inefficient, results. One superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia, for example, boasted to the press that she could tell them what was happening in any classroom in the city at any given moment. What was actually happening was administratively induced chaos, because her standardized, teacher-proof curriculum was incapable of accommodating

individual differences. Second-grade teachers were forbidden to use anything other than second-grade readers and the canned lesson of the day, even if some of the kids still couldn't read. Similarly, seventh-grade math teachers were forced to "teach" algebra to kids who couldn't even do fractions or long division.

In this kind of school system, autonomy, freedom, and choice are anathema. The focus is on standardization, teacher proofing, measured outcomes, and the prison shuffle.

Compulsory Freedom?

We should also consider that democratic, freedom-based schooling would be introduced into an institution in which attendance is compulsory. True, if one can afford an alternative, there is no requirement that kids attend public school. But in every state in the union school attendance of some kind, even if it is only home schooling, is required.

"Democratic Classrooms" indicates that democratic and freedom-based education is grounded in the *premise that people are naturally curious and have an innate desire to learn and grow. If left un-fettered, un-coerced and un-manipulated . . . people will pursue their interests vigorously and with gusto. . . .* Trouble is, when people are compelled to go to school they already are fettered, coerced, and manipulated. That's what we mean by compulsion. Wouldn't compulsory education have to be abolished before freedom-based education could be meaningfully initiated?

And why imagine that youngsters' natural curiosity will be directed at constructive things? One can imagine six-year-olds happily burning insects to death with sunlight and a magnifying glass, or sixteen-year-old inner-city gang members fulfilling their urgent desire to learn small-unit military tactics. Besides which, why assume that everyone is naturally curious? I've taught seventh-graders whose curiosity seemed decidedly undersized.

Of course kids of that age are terribly concerned about peer acceptance, and that places a profound limit on their freedom. Do advocates of freedom-based education adequately consider the tyranny of peers?

The Feds Weigh In

Remember too that there is a powerful new restriction on autonomy, freedom, choice, and democracy in schooling. Emphasizing measurable results, quality control, instrumental and extrinsic motivations, and atomization and fragmentation of knowledge, No Child Left Behind represents the near-total triumph of factory-model schooling in contemporary America. The whole weight of the federal government welds the public school as factory in place as never before.

"Democratic Classrooms" offers the happy prospect of dismantling factory schools and refocusing on student voice and choice. But it's not as if the article advocates moving from A to B. Given the present environment, it advocates moving from A to Z. What are the chances?

"The Business of America Is Business"¹

Another factor militating against the success of the "Democratic Classrooms" prescription is that most Americans spend far more time in the business world than they do where they have a voice and a choice.

What are the work world's characteristics? It's competitive; instrumental and extrinsic motivations dominate, tasks are atomized and fragmented, obedience is required, believing what one is told is valued over criticality, and a person's worth is defined by comparison to others. In short, work-world values are virtually identical to the present school values decried in "Democratic Classrooms." Surely that is not an accident.

What would happen if business leaders suddenly found themselves confronted with employees who expected a voice and a choice? Would the CEO of General Electric or Macy's, for example, be grateful? And could our lawmakers sleep if the nation's corporate moguls were dissatisfied?

The claim here isn't that the business of America *should* be business. It is that the business of America *is* business, and this reality has to be taken into account in any prescription written for the public schools.

Freedom: A Modern Luxury?

The article comments: *In democratic and freedom-based education, students are free to decide what they study, and how, and when they study it.* The article links that to the *form*

of learning found in most pre-industrial societies [in which] the children are actively engaged in the lives of a given society; they learn skills and knowledge by means of imitation, apprenticeship, modeling and conversation rather than in any formal school setting.

Pre-industrial education, though, was not all that free and spontaneous. In my youth, for example, I learned barbering by means of an apprenticeship that closely resembled the apprentice system of the pre-industrial guilds; I was most emphatically *not* free to decide what to learn, or how and when to learn it. The master barber decided.

Remember too that in the pre-industrial era most children grew up on farms. And while those youngsters did learn to farm by imitation, modeling, and conversation, they did *not* have the luxury of freely choosing what they wanted to do and how and when they were going to do it. That's not farm life. If you are haying and it looks like rain, you have to work like hell to get the hay in the barn before it gets wet and spoils; otherwise the livestock starves that winter. Similarly, a kid might prefer not to spend hour after hour in the broiling sun picking potato bugs, but he or she still has to do it for the family to eat potatoes.

Perhaps freedom-based education is a luxury reserved for well-fixed modern kids whom harsh reality doesn't require to do tasks of immediate and urgent importance.

The True Secret of Education

John Locke, a philosopher who inspired the nation's founders, observes in *On Education*: "[I]f the mind be curb'd, and humbled too much in children; if their spirits be abas'd and broken much, by too strict an hand over them, they lose all their vigour and industry."

But Locke also cautions that

He that has not a mastery over his inclinations, he that knows not how to resist the importunity of present pleasure or pain, for the sake of what reason tells him is fit to be done, wants the true principle of virtue and industry, and is in danger never to be good for anything.

Locke, however, does not stop there. He immediately adds:

To avoid the danger that is on either hand, is the great art; and he that has found a way how to *keep up a child's spirit easy, active, and free, and yet at the same time to restrain him from many things he has a mind to, and to draw him to things that are uneasy to him* [emphasis added]; he, I say, that knows how to reconcile these seeming contradictions, has, in my opinion, got the true secret of education.²

The advocates of freedom-based education, then, may have avoided the first error Locke cautions against, only to stumble into the second. They seem to be overlooking the fact that some measure of mastery over one's inclinations is necessary to ever be good at anything. How can anyone learn to accomplish a truly skilled enterprise such as ballet, glass blowing, or engineering in a reasonable time if the initiate, not the expert, decides what to learn and when to learn it?

To be sure, present-day schooling hasn't got the balance right either. Here, in Locke's words, the mind is "curb'd and humbled too much" and the youngsters too frequently "lose all their vigour and industry." That is what "Democratic Classrooms" quite rightly condemns.

The Principle of Correspondence

Historically there has always been a close correspondence between any society's social structure, values, and norms and its schooling practices. In fact, a case can be made that such correspondence is a universal feature of schooling. And "Democratic Classrooms" gets it wrong when it says, "Schools and society are reflections of one another." No, the history of education demonstrates that schooling practices reflect the values and structures of the host society.

That is not to say that alternative schools of a freer, more-democratic nature can't exist in less-free societies. Various forms of them can be found in nations as different as Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Thailand, and the United States; A. S. Neill's Summerhill, perhaps the best-known, is located in Suffolk, England.³ But these schools owe their uniqueness to the fact that they do not serve the broad masses at public expense. They have a self-selecting clientele and do not depend on public consensus or public funding.

Still, it's instructive to know that in 1999 Summerhill ran into difficulties with the U.K.'s educational bureaucracy. Despite the school's higher-than-national-average exam pass rates and extraordinary parental and pupil satisfaction, the U.K.'s education bureaucracy inspected the school and found it wanting. It called Summerhill's pupils "foul-mouthed" and accused them of "mistaking idleness for personal liberty." In effect, the report called for Summerhill's closure if the school failed to abandon the key freedoms it afforded its pupils.

Summerhill took the government to court and won the right to continue its practices. The school survived, and in 2007 another government inspection produced entirely different results. *The Guardian* quotes the new report as saying, "Pupils' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is outstanding." Students are "courteous, polite

and considerate," make "good progress," and are "well-rounded, confident, and mature" when they leave.

Zoe Readhead, the head teacher and daughter of founder A. S. Neill, said: "The government has persistently refused to acknowledge the individual philosophy of the school, such as that children can learn just as well out of the classroom. We feel vindicated." She also added, "It is not the school that changed."⁴ Her point, of course, was that it was the U.K. that had changed.⁵

Undemocratic Americans

"Democratic Classrooms" seems at least as out of step with American values in 2008 as Summerhill was to the U.K.'s in 1999. Certainly the values that "Democratic Classrooms" hopes to promote are anything but widespread. Only some Americans "truly value diversity" and are "truly autonomous yet cognizant of others' needs and rights." And only some Americans "are open-minded yet equipped with critical thinking skills to analyze contradictory ideas." Other Americans angrily deny marriage to gay couples; salivate whenever Rush Limbaugh and his ilk ring a bell; and don't have the vaguest understanding of either freedom or democracy. (They eagerly deny the former to anyone who's different and think of American democracy merely as majority rule.)

Individuals of this persuasion pack a political punch. And they will undoubtedly regard as un-American the values "Democratic Classrooms" prescribes for U.S. public schools. Its new freedoms for students would be understood as self-indulgence and an attack on traditional values such as hard work, discipline, and self-denial—none of which are they particularly keen on practicing themselves.

Remember too that day-to-day U.S. public school policy is set locally by some fifteen thousand elected school boards and, except for large urban districts, broadly representative of village values. So America's public schools have achieved their undemocratic condition in a decidedly democratic manner.

Conclusion

History suggests that public schools rarely, if ever, get out ahead of society. Indeed, they generally lag behind. That is why student voice and choice and all that goes with it will have to await a freer, more-democratic America. If and when that societal change happens, the public schools will follow. Until then, support will be lacking. That's not to say that what "Democratic Classrooms" champions is undesirable. But it may be unattainable, and it is certainly unlikely in the near or intermediate future.

Happily, reform need not be all or nothing. One can, with a little luck, quietly introduce more student voice and choice into one's own classroom. And we should all congratulate any teacher who can elevate the importance of intrinsic motivation; emphasize social and emotional development as well as academics; de-emphasize mere obedience; and get kids to define their own worth rather than let others do it for them. But it had better be done without fanfare and well out of sight of the philistines.

Notes

1. A statement made by Calvin Coolidge in the 1920s.
2. John Locke, "Some Thoughts Concerning Education" (sections 41–50), in *The Harvard Classics*, available at <http://www.bartleby.com/37/1/5.html>.

3. See Summerhill School's Web site: <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/pages/index.html>.
4. Jessica Shepherd, *Guardian* (Manchester), December 1, 2007, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/dec/01/ofsted.schools>.
5. Summerhill School, available at <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/bbc-drama.html>.

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GARY K. CLABAUGH is Professor of Education at La Salle University in Philadelphia and co-founder (with Edward G. Rozycki) of newfoundations.com, which explores reflective educational practice.



EXPLORING THE ISSUE



Are Truly Democratic Classrooms Possible?

Critical Thinking and Reflection

- What values are sought or lost in designing democratic classrooms?
- Does the federal government play a role in democratic classrooms?
- How do societal values compare and contrast with school values?
- How is diversity valued in a democratic classroom?
- What are elements in our society that transfer to designing classrooms that are described as democratic?

Is There Common Ground?

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., the well-known core knowledge advocate, in his latest book *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools* (2009), is clearly at odds with the "truly democratic classrooms produce engaged citizens" ideology. As he has in his past works, Hirsch has no kind words for the followers of John Dewey whose progressive ideas, he claims, led to an abandonment of definite academic studies resulting in the diminishment of Americans' intellectual standing in the world. He sees hope in recent trends toward higher standards and the rise of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs in high schools. In a review of *The Making of Americans*, titled "I Pledge Allegiance to Core Knowledge" in *The Washington Post* (August 30, 2009), Jay Mathews states that Hirsch will settle for nothing less than "a coherent, content-based, multi-year curriculum right now to save our democracy from factionalism, inequality, and incompetence."

Another group of theorists settle in a middle-ground position between subject matter centeredness and an emphasis on student voice and choice. See, for example, "Disciplining the Mind" by Veronica Boix Mansilla and Howard Gardner in *Educational Leadership* (February 2008). They recommend the teaching of disciplinary thinking so as to prepare students to understand the real world in which they live and equip them for the future.

The following writers are supportive of Kristan A. Morrison's point of view: Dana L. Mitra, "Amplifying Student Voice," *Educational Leadership* (November 2008), who

reviews research into student voice initiatives, including student involvement in reform and the professional development of teachers, and Eric B. Freedman, "Is Teaching for Social Justice Undemocratic?" *Harvard Educational Review* (Winter 2007), who examines the "critical consciousness" approaches of Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, addressing the question "When is education democratic?"

Additional interesting sources are Thomas R. Guskey and Eric M. Anderman, "Students at Bat," *Educational Leadership* (November 2008); Deborah Meier, "Democracy at Risk," *Educational Leadership* (May 2009); Chris W. Gallagher, "Democratic Policy Making and the Arts of Engagement," *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 2008); and Stephen Macedo, "Crafting Good Citizens," *Education Next* (Spring 2004). Exploration of some of these articles will open doors to a number of important related issues.

Additional Resources

- James A. Banks, "Human Rights, Diversity, and Citizenship Education," *The Educational Forum* (April 2009)w
- Peter Levine, "The Civic Opportunity Gap," *Educational Leadership* (May 2009)
- Richard Neumann, "American Democracy at Risk," *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 2008)
- Joetta Sack-Min, "A Valued Democracy," *American School Board Journal* (January 2009)

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A Hidden Downside of Democratic Classrooms

www.educationrethink.com/2013/02/a-hidden-downside-of-democratic.html

Are Truly Democratic Classrooms Possible?
Aa Prezi Ppresentation

<http://prezi.com/0stlwjcb6k9y/are-truly-democratic-classrooms-possible-character-education-and-social-responsibility/>

Democracy in Schools: Preached but not Practiced

<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/george-wood/democracy-in-schools-preached.html>

Evidence of Democratic Principles in Our Schools

<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/cmthison/truths/truths.html>

Meaningful Practice: Democratic Classrooms

<http://gordonbwest.com/critical-toolbox/democratic-classrooms/>

