Implementing a Democratic Pedagogy in the Classroom:
Putting Dewey into Practice

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Abstract

A vignette detailing a discussion amongst elementary school teachers brings the ambiguity and challenges of implementing a democratic pedagogy into focus. Using this as a springboard, democratic pedagogy is explored through Dewey's three democratic dispositions: all human beings are morally equal, we are all capable of intelligent and well-informed opinions, and we can solve any problem if we work collaboratively. Taking these dispositions as the structural necessities for enacting a democratic pedagogy, this paper provides practical field examples of these three democratic dispositions as implemented by teachers.

Introduction

In present day Canada, teachers are caught in a tug-of-war between conservative government policies, which focus on increased teacher accountability and standardized curricula, and pressure from liberal educators, who focus on the inclusion of democracy in education (see the edited volume by Portelli & Solomon, 2001 for essays representative of Canadian provinces and territories). Amidst Canadian ministry policies following in the footsteps of the United States *No Child Left Behind* (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), educational theorists such as Beane and Apple (1995), Davies (1999), Leighton (2004), Osler (2000), and Parker (1996) emphasize the need for teachers to "deliberately espouse democratic citizenship, with all its implications and possibilities, as a fundamental goal and organize their subject-matter, their pedagogy, and their classrooms to attain it" (Portelli & Solomon, 2001, p. 47). However, as the following vignette illustrates, a key challenge for teachers exists not in embracing democratic pedagogy, but in knowing what a democratic pedagogy actually is. Following this vignette, this article dedicates itself to describing, in a practical sense, what a democratic pedagogy can look like in the classroom.

Vignette

I am standing at the front of the classroom as 30 elementary school teachers pile into the room, sit at a table, open their notebooks, and look up at me with their pens in hand. I wait for everyone to pile in and settle down. I ask them: "Should the elementary classroom be a democracy?" They all look at their papers and write my question word for word with a question mark at the end. They look back at me, waiting for the next note to write down.

I wait. After a few moments someone says, "Pardon me, could you say that again?"

"Sure," I reply. "Should the elementary classroom be a democracy?" Again, I wait. One student speaks up.

"Well, it can't be; we have too much to cover. We have a mandated curriculum that has to be taught."

"OK," I respond. "There are some obstacles and we'll get there eventually." I write this down on the chalkboard. "However," I continue. "I didn't ask if we could, I asked if we should."

A voice pipes up from the back, "But our schools aren't democratic."

"Just out of curiosity," I respond. "Hands up everyone who doesn't think our elementary classrooms are democratic." Most of the hands go up. "Who's not sure," I ask. The rest of the hands go up. "Alright, we'll come back to why you think that; however," I continue, "I didn't ask if our schools are democratic, I asked if they should be."

After a few moments a student willing to take a risk leans forward and says, "No, they shouldn't be."

"Alright," I reply. "We'll start with that. Now, why not?"

The student thinks briefly and replies, "Because that would mean that everyone has a vote, making the teacher outnumbered, and that the school day would consist of playing games and running around outside."

I quickly write the student's response on the board. "Looking at this reasoning, what assumptions are being made about what a democracy is and who students are," I ask, "Turn to your nearest neighbour and share your thoughts." I wait a couple of minutes before asking for responses to my question. The consensus is that democracy is assumed to be voting by majority rule and that children are anarchists interested only in playing, not learning.

So I ask, "Who thinks democracy equates to a majority rule vote?" No one answers; they are troubled by this thought. "Who thinks democracy is more than that?", I ask. All hands go up. "Alright then," I begin, "what do we need to do to answer my original question: should elementary classrooms be democracies?"

A student in the third row makes the observation that, "We need to define what we mean by democracy."

"Who would agree?", I ask the class. Everyone nods their head in agreement. I break the class into six groups of five with the goal of defining democracy. When they come back to share as a whole group there are a range of responses. Two ideas common to all six groups are that everyone is equal and that a democracy is a political system.

"Very interesting," I reply. "If that is the case, is the classroom a political system?"

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

Defining Democracy

Definitions of democracy are varied, with different definitions carrying different agendas and expectations. Traditional definitions of democracy often limit their scope to defining a specific political agenda, usually focused on turning "self-rule into reality" (Osborne, 2001, p. 33). In contrast, critical definitions from the 20th century view democracy as a "dedicat[ion] to self- and social empowerment…that command[s] respect for individual freedom and social justice" (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 224). In this sense, democracy is linked to transformative dialogue and action that can "alter the oppressive conditions in which life is lived" (Giroux & McLaren, p. 226). This shift from traditional to critical definitions moves democracy from a strictly political agenda focused on *self-rule* to a transformative tool for the re-imagining of society (Hansen, 2002; Levin, 1998; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In this sense, democracy becomes a transformative *social* tool that emphasizes democracy's role in critiquing current society and deliberating on future alternatives. In an age where democratic citizenship education can be viewed as perpetuating a current political structure and is under attack as a method of possible indoctrination (Sears & Hughes, 2006), choosing to define democracy as a critical tool for society becomes extremely important.

In education, Dewey is probably the most recognized proponent of a social definition of democracy (Osborne, 2001, p. 33). Dewey (1938) viewed democracy in education as a "social process" (p. 59). This social process is dependent upon three democratic dispositions: all citizens are moral equals; all citizens are "capable of intelligent judgment and action," with key importance being placed on reflection and the need to "decide for themselves what to believe;" and, all citizens are able to "work together on a day-to-day basis to settle conflicts and solve problems" (McAninch, 1999, pp. 64-65). While broad, these dispositions provide a working framework with which to describe a democratic pedagogy. For the purpose of this discussion, pedagogy is viewed broadly, encompassing not only curriculum (*what* we teach) and method (*how* we teach), but also the classroom context (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999).

Describing Democratic Pedagogy

Democratic pedagogy exists on a continuum (Davies, 1999; Levin, 1998; Parker, 1996; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) that contains numerous practices which teachers can utilize to foster democratic dispositions in their students (Beane, 2005). A logical inference would be that

the more of these practices teachers engage in, the more democratic their pedagogy becomes. While an exhaustive list of practices does not exist, research reveals a number of curricula, methodology, and contextual considerations that appear critical in the development of equality, intelligent judgment and action, and working together. These characteristics are where I now turn my attention.

Equality

Equality represents the foundation of Dewey's democratic dispositions (Dewey, 1938; McAninch, 1999). It is the belief that everyone is equal, including students. To be equal, means that student voices are equal to that of their teachers, the curricula, the textbooks, and the Ministries. Once student voices are placed on an equal footing, the dispositions of intelligent judgment and action, and working together become possible. To comprehensively examine what equality looks like in the classroom, I will describe the effect of equality on *what* is taught in the classroom, as well as *how* that content affects classroom instruction and how resources are used.

The *what* refers specifically to the curriculum. If all participants in the classroom are equal, this means that students are equals with their teacher. It means that their voices, their needs, their experiences, and their knowledge are equal to that of the teacher. It also means that the students' interests are equal to the teacher's interests, which are also equal to the interests or expectations of the curriculum. Consequently, curricula are no longer static documents handed down to teachers and administered to students. Instead, curricula are constructed by teachers, students, and Ministry expectations (Poduska, 1996). Is this even possible?

As equals, student experiences need to be represented in the curriculum and this can be done in a variety of ways. To support student experiences, "teachers need to learn to select and construct curriculum that…represents and connects to their students' lives and experiences" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005, p. 173). In practice, this requires that teachers investigate the interests and abilities of their students and mould the curriculum accordingly (Schultz, 2007). It also means that student-relevant histories have an equal place within the curricula. A great deal of literature focuses on ensuring that student histories, specifically multicultural and gender related histories, are valued and provided equal *footing* along with the traditional histories and contexts detailed in most curricula (Banks, 2001; Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Kymlicka, 1995; Strong-Boag, 1996). Strong-Boag (1996) details the "alienation" (p. 128) that occurs when students are unable to see their multicultural histories reflected in school curricula. Teachers must actively seek out the multicultural experiences of their students and bring that knowledge forward as part of the curriculum. As detailed by Giroux and McLaren (1986), "in this sense, empowerment is gained from knowledge and social relations that dignify one's own history, language, and cultural traditions" (p. 229). By placing this knowledge within the curriculum, students are able to see themselves, their histories, their culture, and their knowledge as having an equal place in the classroom. It is important to note, before moving onto an examination of teaching methods in relation to equality, that the sharing of experiences can only be accomplished when students are working in a safe and respectful environment (Hansen, 2002); empowering students "starts with a non-threatening classroom environment" (Sorensen, 1996, p. 89). Equality in the classroom requires freedom from oppressive behaviours such as racism, sexism, and bullying as well as

equal access to resources (McAninch, 1999). Consequently, classroom interactions need to be both monitored and modelled to ensure that students can work in a supportive environment.

To support curricular equality, *how* the curriculum is taught is also critical. The methods employed by teachers need to emphasize equal opportunities for participation. Teachers need to incorporate teaching strategies that encourage all students to share their experiences (Davies, 2006; Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998); their experiences represent knowledge that is valued and critically examined equally with that of textbooks and authority figures. As a result, classroom interactions need to illustrate the value of sharing experiences and listening to each other as resources (Levin, 1998). This type of "empowerment involves knowledge that is genuine and comes from sharing experiences, ideas, perspectives, and values with others" (Sorensen, 1996, p. 89). It also means recognizing that student voices have an equal right to be heard.

Beyond the emphasis on sharing experiences, classroom decision-making, critical discourse, and assessment practices also affect the degree of equality in a classroom. Davies (2006) emphasizes the importance of involving students in classroom decisions:

> If pupils are to be educated in and for global citizenship this suggests that they should experience democracy and human rights in their daily lives at school—and not just be told about it. This means that pupils must have some role in the decision-making structures of the school. (p. 16)

Involving students in classroom decision-making can take several forms (Levin, 1998). For example, decisions can be made regarding which topics to study for an independent project (Hahn, 1998; Sorensen, 1996), whether to work in groups, pairs, or independently (Poduska, 1996), and when to use the bathroom or a classroom stapler without seeking permission (Cunat, 1996). To illustrate, Cunat (1996) describes one such example whereby students are involved in determining how a unit on the American Revolution was to be structured and learned. She shares,

> We brainstormed possibilities. I told them things I'd done in the past. They thought of things they'd done. We discussed suggestions from textbooks. We remembered movies about the Revolution. Eventually the students decided to do a "living history," which included narrations and skits that they wrote. (p. 132)

The aforementioned example demonstrates a teaching practice in which we can hear student voices equal with that of the teacher, curricula, and textbooks. However, it is important to remember that "students…do not always come to us ready to think critically, reflect on issues, make decisions, solve problems cooperatively, and feel a sense of ownership…[teachers] must actually demonstrate and teach these activities to…students" (Sorensen, 1996, p. 89). Keeping this in mind, incorporating student decision-making is a gradual process whereby teachers increase the degrees to which student voice plays a role in the classroom. This is accomplished by providing boundaries and feedback to develop decision-making skills that reflect concern for themselves, their classroom community, and the curricula within which they are working (Case & Wright, 1995).

One strategy commonly used to incorporate student decision-making in a whole-school approach is the enactment of student governments or councils (Hahn, 1998; Osler & Starkey, 2005; Potter, 2002). These councils provide opportunities for students to have a voice in the decision-making for the school, to implement school-wide strategies (e.g., recycling), and present concerns to the School Boards. However, a concern arises regarding the limited number of students usually involved in school government. In most cases, school government opportunities are limited to a single student per grade, resulting in a large number of students who do not get to experience the benefits (Davies, 1999). Realizing the limitations of traditional student governments or councils, teachers can implement practices that work to increase opportunities for equal participation. Example activities include classroom referendums to share opinions regarding issues; the organization of small classroom groups to create presentations for the school councils; and, the organization of classroom councils to address those issues pertinent to the classroom, the school, and even the community. As a result, greater equality can be achieved with regards to student voices with the school as a whole.

Enabling critical discourse is another method for incorporating student voice in the classroom. In practice, this means recognizing the right for students to question what they are doing in schools. As described by Poduska (1996), "Students needed to have the freedom to choose and the freedom to criticize, without any externally imposed ramifications. These criticisms had to be taken seriously with the view of effecting change. The why had to be asked and answered constantly" (p. 117). This type of practice recognizes that teachers and schools are accountable to students, just as students are accountable to them.

Student voice can also be located in the methods teachers use to assess and evaluate students (Levin, 1998). Traditionally, assessment is viewed as opportunities for students to "*prove to the teacher that they have mastered the given material for a class*" (Sorensen, 1996, p. 89). This view is antagonistic to democratic pedagogy that views "knowledge [as] created, shared, and respected by all involved" (Sorensen, 1996, p.89). Assessment methods in a democratic classroom focus on assessment as a reflective process whereby assessment practices are utilized as additional learning opportunities not simply markers of achievement (Earl, 2003). Sorensen (1996) emphasizes the use of reflective portfolios with her class, incorporating critical self-assessment that illustrates "to students that grading is not an arbitrary act that is done *to them*. Instead, it is a tool for growth" (p. 94, emphases added). Incorporating peer assessment opportunities also supports the democratic disposition of equality by valuing the voice of students. Sorensen (1996) describes how "through activities such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, peer editing, cooperative researching and the sharing of creative writing, poetry, and literature, students begin to see the value of peer input and collaboration in the learning process" (p. 89). Additional methods teachers can employ to increase student voice and empowerment with respect to assessment include sharing evaluation criteria with students, teaching students what success on assignments looks like, and encouraging student input in the creation of evaluation criteria (Earl, 2003).

Finally, equality in the classroom also relates to an equitable access to resources. Resources are often viewed as textbooks, supplies, and opportunities to participate in field trips (or other school functions). However, the distribution of resources can often increase inequalities in the

classroom. An example from Poduska (1996) illustrates how certain reward practices implemented by teachers actually disadvantage some students by denying them access to resources that should be available to all students in an equitable way:

> I had been using computer time as a reward for completing assignments and as an incentive for all to work more quickly. As is often the case with this tactic, relatively few students were able to earn computer time and these students were able to use the computer frequently. At a class meeting, many students objected to this practice, calling it unfair and biased. (p. 119)

As a result, the classroom context needs a critical review for those opportunities and resources provided to a minority of students and how the classroom environment and interactions can be altered such that equal access is not only provided, but also experienced by all students.

Having comprehensively reviewed how equality can be attained in the classroom by ensuring student voices are heard in the curriculum, by maximizing the sharing of personal experiences, and by incorporating student input for classroom decisions, assessments, and resource allocations, I now focus on how intelligent judgment and action are supported.

Intelligent Judgment and Action

According to Giroux and McLaren (1986), "knowledge has to be made meaningful to students before it can be made critical" (p.234). By connecting curricula with student experiences and histories, teachers make knowledge *meaningful* for students. However, what is needed for that knowledge to be made *critical*? As referenced by McAninch (1999), "Dewey asserts that reflection, the method of intelligence, is central to a democracy where good citizens participate in the reconstruction of values and decide for themselves what to believe" (p.65). Making informed judgments requires both explicit instructions in critical thinking (Kassem, 2000) as well as opportunities to practice decision-making (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). In practice, curriculum documents (e.g., British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006) emphasize how explicit instruction in critical thinking requires a critical excavation of multiple perspectives with an emphasis on making connections between events, individuals, and locations. Explicit instruction is also required to help students define, utilize, and develop several key habits of mind (Case & Wright, 1995). These habits include an "awareness of one's own thinking processes, inquisitiveness, fair-mindedness, tolerance, sensitivity, open-mindedness, persistence, and the ability to set goals and make plans" (Kassem, 2000, p. 31).

One of the key instructional methods that teachers can use to provide practice in making informed judgments and action is the discussion and debate of controversial issues. The need for explorations of issues-based curricula (as detailed by Hahn, 1998) that deal with local and global concerns has been expressed by both students (Bickmore, 2005; Davies, 2006) and researchers (Hahn, 1998; Levin, 1998; Obenchain, 1997; Sears, 2004). In this sense, the classroom becomes an open environment where critical issues affecting students and the world can be constructively addressed. For instance, based on questionnaires administered to 14 – 19 year olds in five different countries, Hahn (1998) found a positive correlation between student perceptions of classroom openness and the level of "political efficacy (a belief that students can influence

government decision making)" (p. 85). Sears (2004) noted this same "correlation between classrooms in which important social issues are discussed and investigated…and the greater student knowledge and engagement" (p. 102).

Controversial issues in need of deliberation range from concerns with the environment to the inequities inherent in social, racial, gender, and class divisions. Within the respectful environment of the classroom, students require opportunities to learn about the multiple perspectives related to controversial issues, debate these perspectives in a collaborative framework, formulate opinions, and, possibly, take action based on these opinions (Levin, 1998; Osler & Starkey, 2000). For the teacher, this may also mean that they may need to assist "students in analyzing their own experiences so as to illuminate the processes by which they were produced, legitimated, or disconfirmed" (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 234). As demonstrated by the vignette that began this discussion, informed decision-making requires a critical investigation into our students' assumptions and expectations.

While not as prevalent in research literature looking at the development of democratic pedagogy through informed decision-making, Davies (2005) "stresses the importance of imagination in human rights education" (p.27). Davies recognizes that it is critical for students to have practice imagining the future as they would like it to be. In doing so, students are better prepared to problem-solve, work towards that vision, and take ownership. Consequently, problem-solving is not simply an act of critical thinking; it requires a creative element—an ability to think beyond the problem or issue and envision solutions. As teachers, how do we tap into this creativity when examining controversial issues? Davies suggests that students require opportunities to collaborate and practice envisioning the world as they would like it to be. In this sense, imagination becomes the creative link which can enable the enactment of informed decision-making.

Working Together

Whether detailing the need for students to listen to and share their voices, provide peer assessment and feedback, or engage in collaborative dialogue which deliberates controversial issues, cooperation and teamwork are imperative to a democratic pedagogy. As explained by McAninch (1999), "Democracy is the belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation…is itself a priceless addition to life" (p. 65). As already described, in practice, this collaboration needs to permeate the classroom, but it also needs to exist between the classroom and the community at large— bringing community into the classroom while also taking the classroom out into the community. Osler and Starkey (2005) describe this type of classroom-community approach as "outward-looking" (p. 141). In this sense, community is defined broadly, including local and global, individuals and groups. Connections can be made to students in other countries through multi-media, local community members can be brought into the classroom for presentations and projects, global organizations can be contacted and supported, and student field trips can take place throughout the community (for additional examples see Potter, 2002).

With each example of collaboration in practice, recognition needs to be given to schools as both a part of society and a creator of society. As described by Giroux and McLaren (1986), ensuring

classroom-community collaboration, beyond strengthening students' ability to work together, provides a much needed opportunity for equality that extends beyond the classroom. They state,

> It is an unfortunate truism that when communities are ignored by teachers, students often find themselves trapped in institutions that not only deny them a voice, but also deprive them of a relational or contextual understanding of how the knowledge they acquire in the classroom can be used to influence and transform the public sphere. (p. 237)

An *outward-looking* classroom provides a curriculum that introduces students to varied aspects of their community, utilizes methods that emphasize critical interactions with a variety of community individuals and groups, and provides a context that can empower students within their communities, both locally and globally (for example, see Schultz, 2007).

Summary and Cautions

An exploration of how Dewey's principles of equality, intelligent judgment and action, and working together reveal an overlapping theme of student voice, a theme which was further explored by examining lessons learned through the use of these principles in the classroom. Teachers implementing a democratic pedagogy not only seek classrooms of open dialogue, they also encourage critical student feedback on traditional aspects of school (Poduska, 1996). This in turn requires teachers to critically evaluate their own classrooms. These teachers ask questions such as, is this knowledge worth knowing, have my students learned anything from this test, and can every student see themselves in these textbooks? Questions such as these result in a difficult challenge for teachers. The quest to encourage student voice in the classroom requires teachers who value and use their own voices. In a time when teachers are inundated with Ministry calls for increased accountability and standardization (Portelli & Solomon, 2001), it is becoming more and more difficult for teachers to hear their own voices in the curriculum and in textbooks; if teachers are unable to have their voices equal, how can they be expected to provide that opportunity for their students? Beane (2005) suggests that, for this very reason, it is critical for teachers to:

> …begin to see what they already do in the context of democracy and give it that name…. Standing for democracy is more powerful than standing for a teaching method. And criticizing democracy is much more difficult than attaching a teaching method. (p. 4)

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