

Democratic Classrooms: Promises and Challenges of Student Voice and Choice, Part One

by Kristan A. Morrison

Abstract

If we ever hope to have schools that are engaging and that truly embody democracy, then the classes within them must provide opportunities for students to experience autonomy, freedom, and choice in what is studied, when, and how. This article explores both the historical and theoretical framework of democratic freedom-based education and the promises and challenges of implementing democratic practices in schools.

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Introduction

Schools and society are reflections of one another. Certain values and beliefs are dominant in our society and inculcated in school. They include

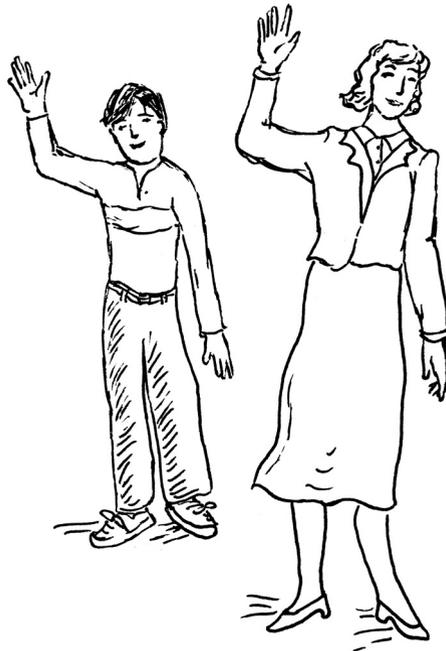
- a competitive ethos and firm conviction that a meritocracy exists in our society
- a view that instrumental and extrinsic motivations are more important than intrinsic motivations
- an excessive valuing of academics
- A belief in the atomization and fragmentation of subjects of study, people, and nature
- the conviction that the characteristic of obedience (doing as one is told or believing as one is told) is of more value in our society than that of criticality
- the belief that one's worth can be defined by others (as good student or bad student)

Once students become adults, they perpetuate those same dominant values in both society and school.

This cycle is complicated, however, because beyond those dominant values, schools are “terrains of struggle” (Giroux 1988), places where contradictory values and ideals compete for prominence.

Critical educational theorists, who include John Dewey and more-contemporary authors such as Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, bell hooks, David Purpel, and Maxine Greene, argue that certain moral, political, and intellectual ideals should take precedence over others in schools. They assert that our schools should emphasize commitment to a democratic system in which each citizen’s autonomy and dignity are honored in an open, just, respectful, and pluralistic community, a community that values and encourages a critical approach in the intellectual search for truth and meaning in each individual’s life (Purpel 1989).

The community these theorists seek is a delicately balanced synthesis between the individual (thesis) and a collection of individuals (anti-thesis). In other words, an individual’s autonomy is delimited by others’ rights to dignity, respect, safety, and the search for truth and meaning to everyone’s lives; if person A decides to do something that somehow infringes on person B’s rights, then person A is prohibited from taking that action and encouraged to find actions that can both express his or her autonomy and honor the rights of others.



Many of us know from experience that our society's schools often fall far short of fostering the development of people who value diversity, who are both autonomous yet cognizant of others' needs and rights, and who are open-minded yet equipped with critical-thinking skills to analyze contradictory ideas. Instead, many of our schools foster the development of very different sorts of individuals.

Does that indicate that the critical educational theorists are wrong? No, it just means that they and like-minded educators must struggle to actualize their ideals in schools. One way to do that, I would argue, is to institute more democratic and freedom-based practices within our educational system. This article explores the historical and theoretical framework of such practices, and then goes on to detail their promises and challenges.

Definitions and Historical/Theoretical Framework

The term "democratic education" as used in this article is linked with and synonymous with the term "freedom-based education," for just as democracy as a political system is grounded in individual freedoms, democracy as an educational system is also grounded in freedoms. The linkage between the two terms is supported by the self-descriptions of most freedom-based schools in the United States (e.g., "free schools," Sudbury Valley-modeled schools, "unschooling" families, etc.), which also identify themselves as sites of democratic education.

In democratic and freedom-based education, students are free to decide what they study, and how, and when they study it. This form of schooling has a number of historical antecedents, outlined by Bennis (2006). He argues that one genesis of this model of education is the form of learning found in most pre-industrial societies. In these societies (past and present), children are actively engaged in the life of a given society; they learn skills and knowledge by means of imitation, apprenticeship, modeling, and conversation rather than in any formal school setting. Freedom-based education is also rooted in the Western philosophical tradition of the ancient Greeks, in the Romantic thinkers (e.g., Rousseau and Froebel), in the libertarian-anarchist tradition, in the transcendentalist movement of nineteenth-century America, and in the twentieth-century free-school movement (e.g., Summerhill School, led by A. S. Neill, and the many U.S. free schools that cropped up during the countercultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s) (pp. 23-32).

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 (e.g., by conventional educational practices that often diminish those innate characteristics), people will pursue their interests vigorously and with

gusto, and thus learn and make meaning on their own and in concert with others. Individuals honored and respected in this process become socialized to honor and respect the dignity and autonomy of others (Dennison 1969; Hern 1996; Holt 1972, 1989; Illich 1971; Llewellyn 1997; Mercogliano 1998; Neill and Lamb 1992).

Although most contemporary freedom-based education is found in the form of private schools or the home-schooling version, “unschooling” (Morrison 2007b), American public schools could shift more closely to this model by adopting more-democratic practices and organizational structures (Reitzug 2003). Thus, enacting democratic practices within conventional, more-authoritarian and -bureaucratic schools could serve as a steppingstone toward adopting the model of democratic and freedom-based education more fully.

Democratic education can take multiple forms, ranging from the micro level of within-class democracy to the more-ideal macro level of whole-school democracy, and within each level, a number of different democratic practices can be enacted. For example, at the micro level, a teacher can utilize discussion; offer students test and assignment choices that attend to their unique learning preferences; allow students “protest rights” (Shor 1996); practice contract grading (Shor 1996) or self-grading; allow students to call the teacher by first name; and ask students to co-construct the course (have a voice in course content, grading, rubric creation, etc.). At the macro, whole-school level, schools can allow students to construct their entire curricula. (See Morrison 2007a, which examines the Albany Free School, a school where pre-K through eighth-grade students choose what, how, and when they study subjects, or see Goddard College for university-level self-development of curricula.)

Promises of Democratic Education

Proponents of democratic and freedom-based education argue that with autonomy and choice, people experience a much-different, much-better form of education than that offered by the conventional, hierarchical, more-coercive education system present in most public schools.

First, they argue that a democratic education promises much more meaningful learning. If people have choice and freedom to study what interests them, then they become more deeply engaged in, and thus less alienated from, their learning. More engagement leads to better retention and better critical reflection and analysis. For example, Watson wrote in *Summerbill: For and Against* (1970) that “pupils given freedom to decide what they will do, when, and how develop increasing independence, stronger interests, and better quality of work” (p. 177).

Gatto, in *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schools* (1992), echoes that argument, stating that our conventional education system infantilizes students by constantly compelling them and that this compulsion “guarantees that they will do [work] poorly, with a bad will, or indifferently” (p. 93). Democratic education, conversely, has no infantilizing effect; instead, it places great trust in the students, and they, more often than not, rise to the challenge. In the process, students become more mature, self-disciplined, and intrinsically motivated, seeing the value of learning above and beyond its usefulness to getting a “good job” (Bhave 1996; Labaree 1997).

Proponents of democratic education further argue that people who are given freedom and choice will ultimately become better democratic citizens because they have learned how to negotiate with others, to name obstacles, and to know themselves (Bhave 1996; Dewey 1916; Gatto 1992; Goodman 1962; Holt 1972; Holzman 1997; Illich 1971; Morrison 2007a; Shor 1996). That ultimately benefits all of society by developing people who are open to change and to listening to others so that all consider themselves vital to society. As Shor argued in *When Students Have Power* (1996): “Power-sharing . . . creates the desire and imagination of change while also creating the experience and skills for it. The critical-democratic class, then, is a context for change that develops the desire and imagination to make change” (p. 176).

Challenges of Democratic Education

Democratic education is, in many ways, antithetical to conventional school practices in our society. Student voice and choice don’t fit particularly well into a system characterized by bureaucracy and hierarchical structure (Reitzug 2003). There are three main areas of challenge to instituting democratic practices in classrooms and schools—students, teachers, and the institution as a whole.

Student challenges

Students educated in conventional schools for the majority of their lives represent one of the biggest challenges to democratic education. Because soliciting student voice and choice in the classroom lies so far outside the educational norm in our society, democratic education practices may be met, initially, by considerable student resistance. Most students are accustomed to being told what to do and to acting passively in the classroom; they are viewed, and may view themselves, as safe-deposit boxes waiting for deposits of knowledge to fill them (Freire 1970). The hidden curriculum trains students to be quiet and docile, to be indifferent to and bored with course content (because they have no say in what

it is), and to accept being told what they and their work are worth (Gatto 1992; Giroux 1978; Illich 1971; Vallance 2003).

It should come as no surprise that students who have experienced this training, especially those students who have succeeded in the “game” of schooling, might resist changed rules that ask them to go against all they have been taught. Students who come from conventional education into classrooms or schools employing democratic practices will often feel uncomfortable with or even fearful of jeopardizing the only pattern of life they know (Goodman 1964). They may become “Siberians” (Shor 1996) who gravitate to the periphery of the class, where they sit silent and disconnected from democratic processes. Asked to play a role in content construction (e.g., explain what they are generally interested in studying, or a particular topic), they may be at a loss, for many have never even considered what their own interests might be. Spontaneous initiative, curiosity, and trust in themselves, by and large, may have been drummed out of them; they may have learned to view education as purely instrumental—a means to an end rather than an end in itself (Bhave 1996; Holt 1972; Labaree 1997). Students thus may resent anyone trying to show them differently. This resentment will be connected to a lack of trust and the antagonistic teacher-student relationships that are the norm. Students have been trained to start out viewing most teachers as “the enemy”—people who infringe on their will and their freedoms. To be asked suddenly to change this view is more than many students can handle.

Besides student resistance to democratic education, another challenge that arises is students mistaking positive freedom for negative freedom. Maxine Greene, in *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988), has defined negative freedom as freedom from constraints. That is the starting point for positive freedom, but positive freedom also encompasses the freedom to work in concert with others to overcome limits. Democratic education is not negative freedom alone; it does not only mean freeing students to do whatever they want. As Dewey wrote in *Experience and Education* (1938): “For freedom from restriction, the negative side, is to be prized only as a means to a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely; . . . power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation” (pp. 63–64). Because conventionally educated students have so little experience of any freedom in school, so little practice with democratic discussion or with assuming authority on their own, they will often mistake democratic, positive freedom practices for negative freedom only. Students may thus see the teacher who asks for democratic input as weak or unprepared, and they may attempt to evade, rather than make, their opportunities (e.g., push for lowered workloads, etc.) (Shor 1996).

Teacher challenges

Students will not be the only ones who resist changes; teachers will balk as well. Very few teachers have experienced democratic education themselves, so to attempt to institute democratic practices in their classrooms represents a sizable leap into the unknown. Teachers may be fearful of this unknown, fearful that involving students' voices and choices in running a course will produce chaos and an overall lack of learning. Part of this fear stems from lack of trust in students. Teachers have become accustomed to viewing most students as lazy and uninterested, people who must be pushed, prodded, cajoled, and threatened into doing "what's best for them," and thus they fear that students will try to minimize challenges and take the easy way out (Goodman 1962; Gross 1973; Holt 1970, 1972; Rogers 1969; Sheffer 1996; Watson 1970). Another part of this fear of chaos and lack of learning lies in conventional ideas about what learning is. Many teachers, themselves schooled in conventional educational institutions, believe that their role is to fill students with curricular information. They might argue that students, who don't know what they don't know, cannot possibly exercise choice and freedom in curricular content to create real learning.

The idea that knowledge can be stuffed into the individual, as opposed to being constructed and mediated through the individual (Lamm 1972), has led to the conventional educational practices of mandated courses and pre-established syllabi. Teachers are used to coming, and in fact are expected by both students and their administrators to come, to the first class with content ready for delivery to interchangeable students. Teachers may feel that if they arrive without a pre-set syllabus and lesson plans, students and administrators will view them as weak, unprepared, or lacking in authority. The class's disrespect could lead to poor course and teacher evaluations as well as jeopardize their jobs. Besides losing control, teachers might also fear silence and an emptiness if they attempt democratic practices. They might also fear that some students will take over and silence others. Last, inviting student voice and choice might ill prepare students for the "real world," where they will have to learn to bow their wills to others and see their needs go unmet (Guterson 1996).

Conventionally schooled teachers who dare to implement democratic practices must grapple with all these fears. They must be willing to abandon plans and adjust to the process of dialogue; they must learn to listen more than talk, not apply one lesson plan to all sections of the same class, and surrender their authoritarian supports (Shor 1996). They must learn to trust students' innate curiosity, and if this curiosity has been crushed in the past, they must work to bring it back to life. Teachers must take to heart what Rogers wrote in *Freedom to Learn* (1969):

If I distrust the human being, then I must cram him with information of my own choosing, lest he go his own mistaken way. But if I trust the capacity of the human individual for developing his own potentiality, then I can provide him with many opportunities and permit him to choose his own way and his own direction in his learning. (p. 114)

And teachers need to recognize that democratic educational practices may well lead students to reject the “real world” of hierarchical authority and to work for more true democracy in the larger economic, political, and social systems. Teachers who attempt more-democratic educational practices thus embrace education for the world that might be rather than for the world that is.

Institutional challenges

The institutional structures of conventional education also represent significant stumbling blocks to enacting more-democratic practices. Unless the entire institution is itself fully democratic, teachers who attempt to bring democracy into heretofore undemocratic spaces will encounter challenges.

The “deep structures” of schools compose one such challenge: those “widely shared assumptions about what schools are for and how they should function” (Tye 1998, paragraph 5). One example of such deep structures is the conventional schools’ view that knowledge exists outside and separate from human mediation and construction and that learning equals the transmission of this information from holders of this knowledge (teachers) to empty vessels (students).

This view of knowledge leads to conventional school practices: mandating that all students learn certain subjects; insisting that subjects be fragmented one from the other; and enforcing a certain progression of information that follows an external, discipline-specific logic (e.g., take algebra before geometry). Educational managers who hold this view of knowledge might argue, as mentioned in “Teacher Challenges,” above, that students don’t know what they don’t know, so how could they possibly decide what should be included in a class? The managers also might worry that students who have voice and choice on subject inclusion might choose not to learn what the institution considers vital information.

That concern, a valid one, can be dealt with by establishing institutional structures and practices that allow time to explore the ideas of negative and positive freedom described earlier. Students’ resistance to learning certain ideas often stems from feelings of powerlessness rather than from willed ignorance; if educational institutions can set forth rational and personalized arguments for the worth of some topic (beyond stating in a course catalog that the subject will make one liberally

educated), students will willingly include that topic in their studies. Certainly this process can become time-consuming, but that is intrinsic to learning democratic habits of mind.

The view of knowledge and learning described above also impacts assumptions about class sizes. If the subject knowledge is simply to be transmitted to students, a high teacher-student ratio is logically efficient. Institutional structures of large classes and mandated, pre-arranged content render attempts to institute democratic practices uncertain. How can a teacher truly get a large number of students' voices and choices heard? Can a teacher stray too far from the mandated content if the teachers around her are working to perpetuate the curricular status quo? Won't a democratic teacher in a required class have a more difficult time breaking through and connecting with the students who resent this limitation of their freedom of choice?

An additional institutional constraint is the conventional system of grading. I have written elsewhere (Morrison 2003a, 2003b) about how grades can deflect students from creating personal meaning and toward simply performing for sought-for ends (e.g., diploma, college acceptance, scholarships, praise, lack of punishment, etc.). This performance orientation complicates the teacher-student relationship: students come to feel less powerful vis-à-vis the teacher and thus act subserviently to earn good grades. Student subservience manifests itself in not questioning or challenging the teacher in any really meaningful way; in essence, students have learned that classroom success often requires that they check their democratic rights at the door. Grading has, perhaps unintentionally, rendered many students voiceless and dependent. (Admittedly, students participate in their own oppression in this regard, but that makes it no less a form of oppression.)

A last major institutional constraint on introducing democratic educational practices to conventional school settings is the use of space and time. The conventional school day is broken into a series of relatively short periods (forty-five to ninety minutes each); school plants are typically divorced from the wider community (separate, often closed, campuses); and there is an extremely high population density. Such use of space and time is inimical to democracy, in which decisions, discussions, and building trust take time (longer than a semester or academic year, or longer than a single class period); connections to and involvement in community activities and spaces are highly valued; and the ability and space necessary to move about freely, and group and regroup, are needed.

Conclusion

Critical educational theorists believe that democratic values—the search for truth and personal meaning, justice, equality, and respect for

the thoughts and humanity of others—will rarely result from schools in which students never have an opportunity to practice democratic habits of mind. Thus, these theorists support including democratic practices in school wherever possible. Clearly, though, there are significant roadblocks to instituting such practices, especially the more deeply these practices infiltrate the organizational structures of schools.

Some might argue that our schools were never meant to create democratic citizens because our society is not now and never truly will be a democracy; the undemocratic characteristics of our conventional schools exist by design. Although such cynicism may be warranted, given what we know about how power is used and abused in our society, critical educational theorists would counter that it is our “ontological vocation” (Freire 1970) to struggle for seemingly far-off ideals. Although we might lack a true democracy now, one will never be attained unless people work for it both inside and outside our educational institutions.

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