

Modeling Democracy in the Classroom

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Research Question

What attitudes and opinions do teachers and students have about participatory democracy in the classroom and school community?

Rationale

“Democracy” is given lip service as the sacred bedrock of our country. However, teacher preparation programs in universities rarely touch on our duty as educators to promote democratic ideals in our classrooms. Where will our students learn the active role citizens must take to preserve and promote democracy if not in our classrooms. Further, if not now, when? In conversation, we find that many Americans’ understanding of how our democracy functions and the role of citizens rarely extends beyond the notion of voter participation. During this politically charged year, it became evident that many citizens in our country are not only failing to actively participate in democracy, but they seemingly do not have a clear sense of what that responsibility entails. These concerns led me to co-author and co-sponsor the “Motion On Teaching Democracy In Schools”, insisting that our local union stand for the teaching and practice of democracy in our schools (see Appendix A). The motion was passed by our Federation Representative Council unanimously. The question became: “What do we do now?”

How do we create more democratic schools and systems in an educational environment that has been marked by the over-emphasis on standardized testing and content “coverage” over the past twenty years? Social studies education has been all but eradicated and educators are often not engaged in making democratic decisions at their schools. The passing of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg with only six weeks until the presidential election and the U.S. Senate’s rush to replace her with another ultra-conservative judge prodded me to further investigate how nations like Germany, with its troubled history in the last century, have embraced the teaching and practice of democratic principles in their schools.

Further, I asked: How can students be expected to participate in democratic processes if never given ample opportunity in the classroom, school and their communities at large? The question then becomes, what is the goal of education if not to prepare students to become equipped with the necessary tools to be active, engaged citizens?

When I questioned my 2nd and 3rd grade students, I found their basic knowledge of democracy to be limited. They were, however, very interested in the election process. One student even posited the question: “Why is voting important?” This led me on a mission to engage my students in democratic processes in our classroom. I wanted to understand their knowledge of what it means to actually participate in school, not just attend. I also wanted to gauge my colleagues’ feelings about “doing” democracy in their classrooms.

Literature Review

While researching the topic of democracy in schools, I found a good deal of books and articles about educators around the world, from the elementary level up to higher education, who have created schools

where these principles were at the forefront of their pedagogy and practice. One notable problem that seemed to arise is the sustainability of said practices. Once the founders moved on, the schools generally transitioned to a more traditional system or to the charter sector.

Research recounted the importance of democratic practices in school like shared governance with all stakeholders in a community having voice. This led to greater student engagement. Apple & Beane, in their book *Democratic Schools* (2007), asserted that “effective involvement will... stimulate a sense of responsibilities and leadership in the [students].” They took this further and stated more simply, “In a robust democracy, people see their stake in others.” Dana Bennis, co-founder and Research and Policy Director of IDEA, has been deeply involved in democratic education since 2001. She concludes, “Democratic education is both a means and an end in itself. In the long-term, it helps develop well-informed citizens who work toward creating a democratic, vibrant, and just society. In the immediate term, it nurtures self-determined and caring individuals who enjoy learning for the sake of it.”

Study Design

I interviewed 21 students who are currently in my 2nd/3rd grade combination bilingual class. I attempted to have a balance of student representation. 11 students speak Spanish as their home language. 10 students come from primarily English-speaking homes. 10 were boys and 11 were girls.

I also interviewed 8 of my school’s 15 licensed staff to gain insight on their views on building more democratic classrooms. I used a simple Google Form for this with affirmative statements that the educators could answer with a 1-5 rating scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, as well as open-ended questions. Each statement was followed by an open-ended opportunity to explain their choice.

Data Analysis

Students were ready to rise to the challenges of changing their classroom. When I asked them about physical changes, they had no qualms about telling me that we should move chairs and tables, get new carpet, paint the walls, and generally make it look nice. Basic classroom management would be made easy by allowing students to sit with whom they choose or moving them around so they could make new friends. There was some disagreement about who should be in charge of these decisions with some insisting the teacher should decide, while others felt this should be collaborative between the teacher and students.

They were adamant that they would take more ownership of the classroom if they were allowed to work with the teacher to make the rules, rewards and consequences. Students should be able to choose to refocus and return. They innately felt that the community should be involved by insisting that the teacher should bring their parents into the behavior plan (“call mom/dad”). One of the students said that we should vote for the rules using anonymous polls. There was a general plea for more art and curricular choices.

When educators responded to the statement “Students should be involved in designing the lessons and how we meet standards in subject areas”, 1 teacher strongly agreed, 3 agreed, and 4 were neutral. Some concerns expressed indicated teachers’ fears of retribution for not adhering to standards: “Students can provide input but without a thorough understanding of the standards and what needs to be done, I don’t

know that designing lesson plans is appropriate for students.” Another suggested that such input was appropriate for “older students” but that elementary students’ ability to discern how to “meet standards may be a bit much for them.” 100% of teachers either strongly agreed (29%) or agreed (71%) with the statement that students should have more opportunities to participate in decision making processes in their classrooms.

Educators were again unanimous in their affirmation of students being allowed to participate in decision making processes in their school as a whole (14% Strongly agree; 86% agree). Caveats were added by a couple of teachers: “Running a school is much more complicated than running a classroom” and “adults must guide these opportunities.” One teacher summed up their enthusiasm for more student participation by stating that this “will help teachers and leadership remember that we are here to make education fun and inspirational for the kids.”

When asked to describe ways students have democratic choices in your classroom, educators were full of ideas: choosing centers or areas, projects, group or independent learning, sharing cultures to integrate into learning, creating classroom rules and rubrics, and rewards and consequences. Simple matters like voting for songs they would like to listen to and which book they would like to read were cited. One teacher wrote, “If a student has a good idea for a lesson, we create a lesson. I encourage students to be individuals and pursue their interests.”

As for educators’ ability to make democratic choices and school-wide decisions, most of the teachers cited the contract language around their instructional council (IC) and how it allowed them to voice their opinions to create some change in the school. They felt valued in collaboration, staff meetings, and union participation. One respondent said, “We are able to voice our opinions and give input. Little ones should be able to do the same.” However, one teacher lamented, “I feel like I don’t have much control or have the ability to make democratic choices in school wide decisions. I just feel that way.”

I asked “How would you like to make your classroom and your school more democratic?” They replied that we could give kids choices for social studies or science lessons, reading/writing interests, and ideas for rules or classroom projects.” The educators passionately expressed: “I would like to have the time and freedom to teach in a way where we all have a voice in our classroom without too many mandates and testing.” “Let go of control and give students more choice and more instruction on how we can be more democratic as a classroom.” “I would love for my students to decide what they would like to learn. From there I would employ my own strategies in order to collect the documentation I need and involve literacy, math, science, music and so much more into our lessons.”

Finally, I asked, “What barriers do you see to making your classroom and/or school more democratic? I was not surprised by the answers: “curriculum and test requirements, a lot of guidelines and district expectations and rules, teaching to the test, time constraints due to filling all the expectations of standards, stepping out of a comfort zone, NM PED mandates, APS decisions, the school’s IC decisions, and the principal’s decisions” and, of course, “not following the prescribed curriculum can cause issues between administration and staff as well as for continuity between grade levels.”

Recommendations/Policy Implications

We must boldly turn our backs on the fears of “wasting time on teaching citizenship” that has been one of the negative consequences of the test-driven “gotcha” culture of the 21st century. We must model democracy in our classrooms and schools by demanding that our rights to self-governance and classroom autonomy be the reality of our work. We must sacrifice control for engagement in our classrooms. But policies on a state, district, and school level must validate and reward this important work. My recommendations for classroom and policy changes closely follow our local union’s “Motion On Teaching Democracy In Schools”.

In the classroom, we must offer students curricular choices and a voice in how and what we study. We can achieve this and meet or exceed state standards by enhancing our literacy, math, and science lessons with infusions of civics. We must examine our own teaching for racial and cultural bias. We can schedule discussions between students, elected officials, and community activists as a vital component of guest speakers in our classrooms and field trips. We can encourage students to write class newsletters and develop agreements to guide behavior within the classroom community.

On a school and district level, we must codify the need for broader curricular choices for all students. There must be shared responsibility between staff, students and community for the upkeep of our school grounds. Restorative Practices and Social Emotional Learning must be the foundations of our classroom management and discipline policies. We have to re-establish peer mediation on the playgrounds of our elementary schools. All students need time during and after school to debate the problems of their schools and communities and to participate in self-generated service learning projects. Democratic, anti-racist curriculum based in critical thinking and culturally responsive pedagogy must be the norm, not the exception. An important component of this is civics education at every level and field trips and guest speakers who are activists and policymakers.

Our district already calls for a student council at each middle and high school, but this is seen as an add-on, not a priority. We must expand this notion of school-wide governance to elementary school. Further, we as educators must invite student participation on our Instructional Councils.

On the state level, the NM Public Education Department must include participatory democracy in state social studies standards. We must adopt and facilitate multilingualism as the foundation of culturally relevant pedagogy.

All of this will require a commitment to intense educator-generated professional development. We can only teach activism by being active.

Bibliography

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Appendix A:

MOTION ON PROMOTING DEMOCRACY THROUGH STUDENT GOVERNMENTS IN OUR SCHOOLS

“Teachers can lead the way by making democracy the guiding philosophy in our schools, and by giving it the opportunity of working itself out in real life situations.” Charles H. Wesley

“Democracy is not a spectator sport, it's a participatory event. If we don't participate in it, it ceases to be a democracy.”- **Michael Moore**

WHEREAS, democracy is not a goal to be attained, but a way of working that requires grass roots, “bottom-up”, action and must be experienced and co-created;

WHEREAS, public schools are the cornerstones of democracy in the United States and must serve as training grounds for informed, participatory decision-making;

WHEREAS, Empowered students are vehicles for positive change in their school and community and must be instructed in the process of participatory government;

WHEREAS, democratic participation through voting and volunteerism are great needs of our community, city, state, and nation;

WHEREAS, consensus building and social responsibility are necessary to save our democracy and reinvigorate it for future generations;

WHEREAS, respectful dialogue, cooperation, and compromise are often not evidenced on our larger political landscape;

WHEREAS, civics education has been eroded by test-based school culture and we are seeing the negative results of this in the low numbers of youth voters and community action;

WHEREAS, the goal of unionism is to promote democracy in present and future workplaces;

WHEREAS, the New Mexico Constitution calls for our state and its schools to operate bilingually and real culturally relative pedagogy must be rooted in bilingualism;

WHEREAS, democracy must include respect for social institutions, their upkeep and reform;

WHEREAS, Albuquerque Teachers Federation believes in and utilizes the power of each worksite's Instructional Council to foster democratic decision-making in our schools;

WHEREAS, there is a need to revitalize our neighborhood schools through collaboration of staff, students, and the community;

WHEREAS, Article 7 of the APS/ATF Negotiated Agreement includes community and student involvement in our Instructional Councils;

WHEREAS, the current pandemic has shone a light on not only the inequities of wealth in our country but the resulting inequities of power based on class and race;

WHEREAS, Students learn best by doing;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, the Albuquerque Teachers Federation will advocate for:

A student council at every Middle and High School with representatives elected to work in collaboration with staff through our Instructional Councils;

The re-establishment of peer mediation in all elementary schools;

All students to have time during and after school to debate the problems of their schools and communities and to participate in self-generated service learning projects;
Democratic, anti-racist curriculum based in critical thinking and culturally responsive pedagogy;
Bilingualism as the foundation of culturally relevant pedagogy;
Social studies classes scheduling regular field trips to democratic institutions such as Board of Education, City Council, and State Legislative meetings;
Student written newsletters;
Restorative Practices and Social Emotional Learning as the foundations of our classroom management and discipline policies;
Discussions between students, elected officials, and community activists as a vital component of guest speakers in our classrooms;
Shared responsibilities between staff, students, and community for maintaining our school grounds;
Broader curricular choices for all students.

SOURCES:

Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education (2007). Edited by Michael W. Apple & James A. Beane.
National Association of Student Councils <https://www.natstuco.org/>