Democracy & Education

Democratic Spaces

How Teachers Establish and Sustain Democracy and Education in Their Classrooms

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Abstract

Democratic education focuses on developing students using democratic principles and processes in the classroom. In this study, we aim to understand how self-identified democratic educators practice democratic education in public-school classrooms. Nine participants, teachers in K12 schools, were interviewed for this qualitative study. In investigating how public-school teachers implemented and sustained democratic education in their classrooms, six themes emerged—fostering relationships, empowering students, and teaching and using democratic skills, democratic educative structure, democratic teacher praxis, and obstacles.

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION FOCUSES on developing students by using democratic principles and processes in the classroom. As Mursell (1955) stated, "The governing purpose of education in a democratic society is to support, perpetuate, enlarge, and strengthen the democratic way of life" (p. 3). To encourage this, a democratic approach to education engages students in building a strong classroom community, taking responsibility in cocreating curriculum, and engaging in critical dialogue on issues that impact their lives. Given the current landscape of the educational system with assessment and accountability measures, it is important to ask how public-school teachers establish democratic classrooms and maintain democratic processes and practices. The following research questions guided our investigation:

1. How do self-identified democratic educators working in public schools view their work to establish and sustain democratic practices and pedagogy in their classrooms?

2. How do self-identified democratic educators frame democracy as an educational practice within the context of the current educational system?

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Specifically, we employed a qualitative approach to interview rural teachers in an Appalachian region of Ohio regarding their perception of democracy as pedagogy within the current public educational system. The investigation offered teachers an opportunity to give voice to their own understanding of democratic processes, practices, and principles. As a result, the study extends the discussion on democratic educational practices across public school settings and adds to the literature on democratic education.

Significance of the Study

Although many practicing teachers may espouse democratic values and can have a conceptual understanding of democratic education, empirical literature on the implementation of democratic practice within the public-school context is limited. In other words, educators generally know *the what* and *the why* of democratic education; nevertheless, *the how* seems to be underrepresented in classroom practices. Many scholars have argued that democratic educative practices are often sidelined by emphasis on accountability mandates and assessment pressures that result from neoliberal metrics (Atkinson, 2017; Hyslop-Margison & Ramírez, 2016; Karaba, 2016). Therefore, in this study, we aim to understand how previous and current self-identified democratic educators both establish and sustain their practice of democratic education in public-school classrooms. We frame this investigation of democratic teacher practice through a Deweyan lens as foundational to democratic theory.

Deweyan Democracy: A Theoretical Framework

Dewey (1899, 1916, 1938) promoted the idea of democratic education as a path to engaging in an associated way of living—being in a community and becoming a citizen. Democracy, for Dewey, is more than a government. It is "an associated way of living," promoted and sustained by a shared, community experience (Dewey, 1916). However, some argue that Dewey's conception of education and teaching are not commonly practiced throughout the U.S. (Feinberg, 2018; Ravitch, 2014, 2016).

Dewey (1899) argued that schools are a microcosm of society. One of a schools' primary functions is creating active, engaged, and critically thinking members of society. As a starting place for fostering such individuals, Dewey (1897, 1916, 1938) focused on schools as a social environment. Ideally, schools provide a social environment for children to experience, address, and develop these social and emotional skills. In this social environment, schooling has the ability to perpetuate and increase the effectiveness of communication, first in the classroom, with the eventual aim being better communication throughout society (Dewey, 1916, 1940).

In a democratic approach, schools provide students with a safe, risk-free place to practice democratic skills and the opportunities to learn how to develop and implement critical thinking and constructive conversations. As opposed to competing with each other for ranking and status, students are encouraged to work with each other and help each other learn (Branco, 2010). Such a democratic application of schooling provides a sharp contrast to the agendas that emphasize standardization and focus on literacy

and numeracy and state-mandated accountability (Sahlberg, 2007). When the focus of education "shifts from creating active, informed individuals to creating good test-takers, the practices in education become de-democratized.

Another concept central to a Deweyan democratic education is individual growth. According to Dewey (1916), a student's growth is largely dependent on purposeful experience. Specifically, through experiences within a community, a student learns and grows as a democratic person. Essential to this conceptualization of growth is the idea of freedom and exploration within schooling and the curriculum (Dewey, 1916). Similar to Freire's (1970) views on banking education where students are simply fed information for later recall, Dewey (1916) asserted that children grow through purposeful experiences and constructed learning.

Educational standards, or in Deweyan terms, *educational aims* (1916), have long been a topic of discussion in the public-school setting. There have been ongoing revisions of content standards, varying ways of organizing them, debates about who should create and control them, discussions on how they should be measured, and a number of different approaches to hold teachers accountable for teaching them. Dewey (1916) asserted that educational aims should come from the learner, strongly asserting that if aims come from another source learning is reduced to a "mechanical process" (p. 72). Similar to Shor's (1992) concept of generative themes and Freire's (1970) concept of naming problems, democratic education asserts that teachers and students must work together to establish shared concerns and common interests. This idea is fundamental to Deweyan education in which students work with teachers in a democratic space to create curriculum.

Literature Review

Neoliberal Accountability Impact on Democratic Practice

Cultural critic Henry Giroux (1992) argued that democracy is not "an empty set of regulations and procedures that can be subsumed to the language of proficiency, efficiency, and accountability . . ." (p. 5). However, the language of accountability has overshadowed the discourse of democracy in contemporary schooling. Scholars in the 21st century have maintained vehemently that democratic education is devalued by a system of schooling framed in neoliberal accountability (Atkinson, 2017; Au, 2009; Biesta, 2017; Karaba, 2016; Meier & Wood, 2004; Murray & Howe, 2017; Ravitch, 2016; Shaker & Heilman, 2008; Yeh, 2017). As a system, neoliberal accountability is predicated on a model that places educators and community members under "a relentless assault on their autonomy when it comes to participating in purported democratic decision-making processes" (Shaker & Heilman, 2008, p. 50). We would include this assault extends to the pedagogical and assessment decisions of teachers within the classroom setting (Ravitch, 2013, 2016; Wood, 2004, 2005). Furthermore, the neoliberal press in education is marked by "federal engineered testing and accountability systems, instructional program mandates, and the forced militarization of our public high schools" that function within "highly regulated and controlled governing systems" (p. 50). Consequently, neoliberal accountability results in a competition-based system that is measured with "a measurement tool that

barely acknowledges anything but test scores as a measure of sound education" (Meier, 2004, p. 70). While scholars have often discussed the neoliberal agenda in terms of privatization, we conclude from the literature that the press of neoliberalism has had an ongoing impact on school processes that directly relate to teacher practice and decision-making and, therefore, on democratic education in the classroom (Atkinson, 2017; Hyslop-Margison & Ramírez, 2016; Karaba, 2016).

Democratic Practices in Schools and Classrooms

According to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) (2018), the four essential elements of democratic education are freedom, discussion, involvement, and equality. Foundationally, these four aspects create classrooms where students develop as active, participatory democratic individuals through experiences that are integral to learning in Deweyan educational philosophy (Dewey, 1916, 1938). Through experiential and participative democratic activities within classrooms and communities, teachers can support students in understanding their own participation and how such participation impacts the world in which they live. Apple and Beane (2007) argued that democratic schools focus on structures and processes that enable student voices to be heard and acknowledged. This empowers each student to defend their own rights and their personal freedoms as human beings. Democratic education seeks to enable students to be empowered as autonomous, critical thinkers (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992; Veugelers, 2007).

Democratic education seeks to involve students in civil and constructive discourse (ASCD, 2018; Dewey, 1916; Wood, 2005). Not only are students encouraged to participate in these discussions but also all stakeholders (students, family, faculty) are invited to forums that address community-oriented interests and issues (Apple & Beane, 2007, ASCD, 2018; Wood, 2005). Democratic education does not limit decision-making to those in charge but works with everyone involved in the school to reach well-informed consensus and well-educated conclusions. Other scholars (Apple & Beane, 2007; Freire, 1970; Wood, 2005) have added that it's important for the civic community to be authentically involved with the happenings of the school. A disconnect should not exist between the two, as education should aim to further the lived experiences of children by integrating and continuing curriculum with their previous knowledge and curriculum (Branco, 2010).

Democratic Teaching Methods

According to Mursell (1955), "The school must lead children to *grow and develop the abilities* needed for the problems of living in a democratic society" (p. 268). Much like the teaching methods of Freire (1998), Horton (1990), Kohl (1994), and Shor (1992), democratic teachers collaborate with students to shape curriculum, solve problems, and effect change that they confront during democratic encounters. Sharing concerns and confronting issues, students and teachers work together towards a common good (Janak, 2013). Within a Deweyan concept of democratic teaching, these practices are not only taught and facilitated within the classroom but also reinforced through students doing and experiencing such processes in their immediate lives.

Although democratic education helps students recognize their own rights and freedoms, it seeks to increase students' worldly perspectives and understandings of other cultures (Apple & Beane, 2007; Freire, 1970). Similar to the Freirean notion of "naming your world," in realizing and fully understanding their own rights and responsibilities, students are encouraged to respect and develop an appreciation and understanding of the rights and freedoms of those around them. In this, students begin to develop a commitment to defending the rights of others (Counts, 1939), which encourages students to develop their own individual voice as a citizen.

Democratic Structure and Relationships

Lastly, Dewey (1916) encouraged the balance between the individual and the community, between the student and the classroom. Dewey (1924) argued the importance of the structure of the classroom and the relationship of teachers to students. Teachers and students alike are encouraged to make choices as individuals and as groups, such as choices about individual assignments, curriculum, or the choices made about the larger school. Dewey (1916) and Freire (1970) both argued that a balance of authority and control between teachers and students is needed. Shor (1992) noted a necessary balance between academic, topical, and generative themes—for example, pedagogy, subject, and learning.

Similar to Shor's (1992) concept of generative themes and Freire's (1970) concept of naming problems, democratic education asserts that teachers and students must work together to establish shared concerns and common interests. Within the structure and relationships of democratic spaces, the teacher and learner create the practice of authentic democratic education. As Dewey (1940) stated, "democracy [is] a personal way of individual life [that] signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life" (p. 222). As such, democratic education seeks to echo the structure of society while allowing for a similar freedom that all citizens enjoy (Branco, 2010).

Methodology

As a qualitative inquiry, our investigation used a semistructured, researcher-generated interview protocol to study how self-identified democratic educators perceive their practice. We interviewed nine participants in southeastern Ohio to investigate their perceptions on creating and maintaining democratic practices in their teaching.

Participants

The participants all teach or have taught in public schools in southeastern Ohio. Of the nine participants, two were retired elementary-school teachers with more than 30 years of teaching experience, and one was retired from middle school, now teaching teacher preparation courses at a university. One was a practicing second-grade teacher with 10 years of experience. The other five participants currently teach in a combined middle and

high school that has a democratic philosophy. The participants have a range of teaching experience from three years to more than 20 years across multiple subjects.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	School Level—Subject	Employment Status
Mary Beal	Female	Elementary School—Kindergarten	Practicing
Zeb Beau	Male	High School—English	Practicing
Amelia Cox	Female	Middle/High School—English	Practicing
Kate Carr	Female	Middle School—Language Arts	Practicing
Lawrence Deer	Male	Elementary School—Second Grade	Practicing
Bob Elliot	Male	Middle School—Social Studies	Retired
Larry Tibbs	Male	Middle School—Math	Practicing
Nate Watch	Male	High School—Government	Practicing
Joan Williams	Female	Elementary School—Reading	Retired

Data Collection

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who considered themselves democratic educators and would best be able to inform the research question. To accomplish this, two key informants, who were former members of a democratic grassroots organization of democratic teachers referred to as The Friday Round Tables, helped in identifying these individuals. Nine semistructured interviews were conducted, using a list of open-ended interview protocol (appendix A). These interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 60 minutes and were recorded using an electronic recording device.

Data Analysis

Initially, we reviewed and reflected on the transcriptions to gain an overall understanding of our data. We developed a series of first cycle codes using open coding. This first cycle coding was conducted by hand. We then uploaded the transcripts and codes into the qualitative data software, MAXQDA for analysis. In our second cycle coding, we condensed the codes into categories of patterns (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017), grouping similar codes that answered parts of our research question together. Through this process we condensed 91 codes into 11 code categories. We next grouped our code categories into themes, allowing for thematic analysis (Glesne, 2016), extracting central themes that addressed the research question. Specifically, the 11 code categories formed five central themes: fostering relationships, empowering students, democratic teaching as praxis, working within a structure, and obstacles in democratic education.

Findings

In our investigation of how public-school teachers implemented and sustained democratic education in their classrooms, six themes emerged. Many participants explained that fostering relationships was central to establishing and maintaining an authentically democratic space. Through fostering teacher-student and student-teacher relationships, participants were able to create a community that enabled all students to fully participate in classroom events and goals. Empowering students was also a central theme in implementing democratic education. By empowering students to use their voices and identify their needs, teachers helped students choose to engage and participate in the democratic practices that were part of everyday happenings within the classroom and school. Teaching democratic skills such as social skills, critical thinking skills, and argument skills was also instrumental in establishing a democratic classroom, while allowing students the space and freedom to practice these skills was instrumental in sustaining a democratic classroom.

All participants recognized the need for a balance between structure that they enforced with freedom that students were able to exercise within the classroom space as important to sustaining a productive and engaging democratic classroom. Teacher praxis in the form of research, reflection, and teacher collaboration was also important for teachers in sustaining their commitment to providing students with a democratic education, and for staying informed on democratic pedagogical development. Lastly, all participants spoke about the obstacles they experienced from the institution of public education, including state-issued curriculum and standards and high-stakes standardized testing. While this made it harder to practice democratic education, each participant explained that they recognized this only as a symptom of working within a larger system and focused on ways to work democratic education into this system.

Fostering Relationships

Each democratic educator voiced the importance of establishing reciprocal relationships between teacher and students. Many stated relationships become important in recognizing each student in the class as an active participant in the democratic process of the classroom. As one participant explained, this sometimes happened before the start of the school year with home visits to begin the year with a gesture saying, "I really do care about who you are, and I'd like to get to know you a little bit" (Williams). By recognizing students as social individuals, mutual relationships can help the democratic process begin.

The majority of the teachers—seven of nine in this study—described their relationships with students to be different than traditional student-teacher relationships. Relationships in a democratic classroom are involved, active, and expected to be reciprocal. All parties are invested in the good of others in the learning environment. Another participant spoke to the value of these relationships in his class, stating:

> *That starts a connection, and when you start to bridge that connection between them, they start to value everything that the relationship*

you're having with them takes on . . . they have to value the members in the classroom, including myself as a member, not as a teacher. (Deer)

This theme indicated that teacher authenticity is key in developing these relationships. Participants often spoke about students' ability to identify sincerity of connections or lack thereof. If a teacher fails to fully engage in the learning process or as a part of the community, the students will follow with disengagement and disinterest. While some students may have resisted this at first, most teachers explained that in the end, students begin to value and buy into these relationships. Carr told one story of a student who moved from an inner-city school to her rural, democratic school:

He came in as a sophomore, and he was really angry, really hated this place because, as he said, "Everybody's in my shit." What he meant was every teacher knew him. Nobody let him fall through the cracks. Whenever he needed something, he was just so used to being able to disappear and not have to do anything, and everybody was kind of holding him to it here. The second year he was here, his junior year, he caught on . . . [H]e started getting involved, and he really liked people and just sort of started to fit in, like he finally accepted that we really did care about him. We weren't just jumping in his shit to give him a hard time. We were doing it because we cared about him. He really blossomed that year.

Developing individual relationships is crucial to a democratic classroom in order for teachers to understand student needs and interests to help students engage in classroom processes and practices. In conjunction with developing individual relationships with students, it is important to develop a strong sense of community across the classroom and school illustrated in the previous quote. Cox also explained:

For me, [democratic education] implies a really important thing, which is knowing your students well, and then if you don't know your students really well, if you don't make that apart of your plan, then it becomes really hard to have the kind of classroom that you would want as far as fostering democracy within your classroom. And then also, knowing your students well and then for me creating that sense of community very intentionally, doing activities that are focused on teaching kids how to get along with each other, activities where I'm trying to be aware of their needs. So, fostering community [i.e., relationships] within my own classroom in the microcosm of the microcosm within the school.

Many participants embedded community-building activities into their content and curriculum to build relationships. As Watch explained:

We do all kinds of community-building. We do all kinds of team-building. That's pretty well hardwired into my classes at this point, about we're a community of learners. We do a lot of flexible grouping, making sure that you . . . In most of my classes, I say to my students, regardless of age level, "Everyone in here knows something that no one

else does." This is like day-one stuff of establishing that we, regardless of any other circumstances, if we are going to be in a classroom together, there are some things, there are some ideas we're going to respect about why we're here and who we are, and making sure that everyone in the room has the same respect and is valued in the same way, or valued at the same level. That's a basic component of all the classes.

Many of the participants in elementary classroom cited meetings as being instrumental in developing a sense of community throughout their classrooms. Classroom meetings were a time to sit down as a whole class and share something about each classmate's life, go over class news, and address any issues that needed to be discussed. Some teachers explained that gradually they released some of the responsibility of leading class meetings over to the students, who then began to conduct the meetings themselves, which further developed the idea of the classroom being a community of learners as opposed to a teacher with their students.

Empowering Students

Agreement among participants pointed to nurturing relationships in a democratic classroom as a means of empowering students. Many of the participants spoke about increasing student agency, access to material, and engagement in their learning process. Instead of teachers telling students what to do, in democratic classrooms, there is space for students to explore their actions and the consequences themselves. In doing this, students are empowered to take part in their education in a meaningful way as democratic member of their learning community. Deer explained:

Parents are always telling them what to do, where they're supposed to be, and so giving them that strength to assess what's going on around them and make a determination on what the reaction is to what they're doing, rather than trying to tell them that they shouldn't be doing that or telling them how they did it wrong. We do that.

While this educator empowered his students by encouraging them to take ownership of their decisions and actions, Carr described student empowerment through different activities was a way to challenge assumptions made by institutional authorities.

Deer also shared that one of the central goals of his classroom is for student voice to be heard in an authentic and meaningful way:

I wanted my classroom to be is a place where you're more likely to be heard, you're more likely to be valued as a resource in so many different ways. I use that word resource, *but I'm also saying all your friends are a sort of resource, either emotional resource or something, but everybody has a value, and that's kind of the thing that I do with my classroom when I look at it that way.*

Another participant, Beau, furthered this idea by emphasizing the importance of teacher intent and student voices being heard:

The intent of the educator, if it's to be inclusive, [it helps] people find their voice . . . Going back to what I was saying [about] meeting

students where they are and really listening to them, I think democratic education is the best way to do that. I think students respond to that. They know when they're being heard.

In some instances, students were encouraged to take part in key decisions concerning their classrooms and schools. Not only were students empowered to take part in processes such as hiring new teachers and breakfast menus, their input was valued as much as the administration and taken seriously. Carr offered one specific example explaining a time when the students and administration came to different hiring decisions and the administration eventually supported the students' decision,

Whenever we hired teachers, they have to come and spend the day. They have to teach a class. We have a student [on the hiring committee]—and it can be any student who volunteers to be on that committee; we usually try to select students that are going to be affected by that teacher. When we hire a middle school teacher, we usually try to get seventh-graders as well as some high school students, who can show them how to run a committee. They have to interview with that student committee. Then we come together and we discuss how we've ranked our choices. Nine times out of 10, we have made the same choice, which is interesting.

As part of the democratic process of the school, after interviews were completed, the committees come together for the final decision-making. Democratic schools, and classrooms, focus on empowering students not only through their words of encouragement, but also through actions that follow those words and commitments. Cox explained that empowering students to use their voice and take action is both a beautiful and a challenging thing at times:

One of the most rewarding things but also one of the most challenging things about having a school that's focus on democracy is that we also, just like the students, have a lot of voice and a lot of agency, so we're going to make a decision, it's like, okay, we're all going to get together, we're all going to sit down, we're going to talk this idea through.

In summary, this theme illustrates that students transform from passive to active recipients of and participants in their education when they are empowered to employ their individual and collective agency. Providing this voice to make changes and be democratically invested in their class and school overtly influences their environment for the better.

Teaching and Using Democratic Skills

Within these democratic communities, it is important for educators to both teach students how to participate in a democracy with the skills needed for participation while at the same time provide a space for students to use these skills. Elliott explained:

In a democratic classroom what we do is we try to work with kids in ways that allow them to identify and use the skills which will be helpful to them as citizens of democratic society. Meaning, when we

teach them . . . the skills and knowledge that we're teaching them in order to not only understand the world but to . . . engage in conversations about the world and policies that our society should implement.

Likewise, Cox shared:

I think about the school as a microcosm for our democracy that we have here in the United States. So, I feel like our number one job is to help the young people that are with us every day sort of matriculate through that process and learn everything that they're going to need in order to be fully franchised citizens of the United States. So, a big part of that for me comes down to becoming a member of a community and learning how to function as a member . . . I always just say the basic idea is that we are trying to graduate fully enfranchised citizens, so right here in our school we've got a microcosm going on. We want to emulate the democracy in its best form here at school.

Collectively, all participants felt that education ceases to be a set of standards to pass a test and takes on a process of readying the future generation with the skillset needed to make decisions and understand the implications of those decisions. Instead, it becomes a safe space for students to practice skill such as discussion, public speaking, and critical thinking with the guidance and support of educators they trust and know care for them. While this may include writing letters to Congress representatives in fifth-grade classrooms, in a kindergarten classroom this can mean encouraging them to take on different perspectives. Beal explained:

With five-year-olds, they're just beginning to really be able to take another person's perspective, so helping them do that and also understanding that a five-year-old is capable, because they're pretty self-centered at that, but also they have really big hearts, so just, I think, understanding that that's the way children are at that point and then helping nurture those big hearts into understanding how other people are feeling or what their needs are.

Watch explained that he sets up his physical classroom to embody a democratic space:

If you see this stuff in my classroom, everybody faces each other. I have discussion based around pretty heavy, what a lot of teachers would call essential, questions, their concept stuff—it's big-idea stuff. It's questions that you'll probably grapple with the entirety of your life. You can always see a different perspective on or come to a different conclusion about. It involves a lot of questioning, preconceived notions, and assumptions.

While critical thinking, classroom discussions, and using content skills with a democratic focus were all important pedagogical methods, many participants emphasized a focus on holistic education. As democratic educators, they recognized the importance of developing students' social and emotional abilities alongside their intellectual abilities. These democratic teachers explained that social and emotional skills are imperative to

developing participatory members of a democratic society. They embraced these social and emotional skills as a foundation for democratic spaces of learning to develop authentically. Watch explained:

> Being able to communicate with one another on a more equitable level. I think students here will talk to you like adults do. They'll talk to you in a very informed and a deeper back-and-forth dialogical way more than you'll see kids do in a lot of other places. I think that we practice a very different set of norms when it comes to just interacting with each other that I think are more democratic.

Democratic Educative Structure

Key to maintaining a democratic classroom is understanding the nature of the structure of democratic education. Often democratic education has been framed as progressive education, and therefore criticized for lacking structure and academic content (Dewey, 1938). The participants in this study explained that a democratic classroom relies on an educative structure that facilitates student empowerment within the classroom. Deer explained that, in his opinion, this structure emulates a true democracy where the citizens have to participate and work within the framework of democratic society. He explained:

> Democratic education has structure, but within that structure, there's freedom. There's freedom to take certain content in a different direction or to make a different choice within that structure. When I say structure, I mean a framework. Every lesson that I teach has a framework, but within that framework, I allow flexibility and choice, and I think that's kind of like democratic society in general.

The structure that Deer described is not defined by its function to establish control but is defined by allowing the democratic process to take place. Rather than creating a framework that exerts a teacher's power over students, a democratic classroom focuses on creating structures that foster student participation and vision.

Democratic Teacher Praxis

Another theme that each participant emphasized was the idea of teacher praxis. This Freirean (1970) notion is based on the idea that democratic reflection informs democratic action. Many of the educators in this study engaged such a praxis in various ways. For example, they discussed reading different authors on democratic education and working with other educators to further their theoretical and practical understanding of democratic education. In addition, they also recognized going to conferences and conducting action research as important elements of being reflective practitioners.

　　Although participants referred to their own reflection in a variety of ways, it was always embedded in their teaching practices. According to them, democratic educators see the work of teaching and learning as larger than their classroom. In their opinion, democratic education cannot be limited to the confines of the physical space of a classroom but extends outward, connecting with other faculty and teachers in their school and the greater civic communities. All of the educators interviewed spoke about the importance of working with other educators in research, in practice, and in support. Certain participants explained that they started their careers as democratic educators when a small grassroots group got together to read and explore democratic education. Elliott noted:

> There were a whole bunch of new, younger teachers. So, we went to a professor, and we said, "Put a good book in our hands." We read a lot of John Dewey. John Dewey certainly was the one who defined for all of us what democratic education is and what the importance of it would be. We kept that study group together for many years.

Other teachers explained that finding a mentor is essential to beginning a democratic classroom. Beal suggested finding friends to read with, making sure that the school you apply to allows teacher autonomy, and meeting with future colleagues to collaborative with. Cox stated that when beginning to establish a democratic classroom, "I would always say that no matter what you're trying to do in education, if you're just getting started, find another teacher who has what you want." She went on to say:

> When I first started teaching, I went to my mentor teacher and just spent as much time around her as possible. I was in her classroom. I think that's really important is getting outside of your own classroom because it's really easy to just be like "I'm going to go in my classroom, I'm going to close my door, I'm going to make it through the day." But getting out in other classrooms in the building where you know teachers are doing good work and learning from them I think is an invaluable tool . . . I think it's really important to stay open in that way and get into as many other people's classrooms as possible.

Support from other teachers, group research, and discussion played a pivotal role in the participants' development of a democratic pedagogy. Some of the teachers shared how much working in a supportive environment can be different from working in an unsupportive environment, such as Elliott, who said:

> One year I didn't have anyone who really was on the same page as I was, as far as what I was trying to accomplish and what we're doing democratically, and it made stuff really difficult. It's not that I wasn't getting along with colleagues. But I think as an educator that we need to make sure we have a support system. We need to have people who know what we're doing and they're doing similar type things. When I was at a democratic school, it was such an exciting time. And if you were having problems, you had someone to talk to about them, and you had people. All of a sudden you have five people helping you figure out what you should do.

Not only is it important for democratic educators to have a strong praxis, it is important for democratic educators to work at this process and engage in this process together. Reflection and collaboration are essentials to successfully implanting and sustaining democratic practices and processes within a public-school classroom.

Obstacles

All participants explained that at times it was difficult to gain either administrative support, peer support, or parental support for their democratic practice. Practicing democratic education sometimes led to tension between teachers and confusion among various stakeholders. A number of participants equated this challenge to the tension between progressive and traditional education approaches. Participants emphasized this tension when they referenced incorporating democratic approaches in place of traditional methods. Carr shared a story about parental reaction to a change in scheduling for the start and end times of the school day:

> One of the things we've been talking about for years at the high school is that the biological clock changes in your teen years. Your biological clock shifts, you tend to stay awake later and not wake up as early. Forever, in schools, you have this idea that "Well, if we don't get kids up at the crack of dawn, how are they going to learn to work." It's like saying, "If I don't give a knife to that baby, how's he ever going to learn to cut a steak." It's like, they're not really there yet. We've talked about adjusting the [start] time. There are things that are not working in our favor. One is daylight savings. You don't want little kids standing out in the dark. And then there's the traditional parents saying, "How will my kid ever learn to get up?" And then there's the argument about kids have to work and have sports after school. So, there was a lot of things to consider.

Many participants explained that at sometimes the tensions created in democratic spaces were addressed by explaining to stakeholders the reasons behind the actions. It was a process of sharing with and making compromises between the teachers and the stakeholders. Teachers described that the best way to approach conflict around the tensions created by democratic teaching practices was by openly addressing them and by educating the parents, co-teachers, community members, and administrators. Establishing democratic spaces for conferences and conversations were methods that participants were able to use in order to sustain their democratic pedagogy.

One hindrance to democratic education, for participants, was high-stakes standardized testing. All of the participants in this study argued that high-stakes testing impacted their pedagogical approaches. It not only limited the amount of student-centered content and instruction but it also limited the time spent engaging in democratic practices such as discussion, project-based learning, and social-emotional growth. Exemplary of this concern, Carr argued:

> Standardized testing is the number one [obstacle], always. When we're trying to look at a holistic student-centered approach for our schools and for our classrooms, the implementation of standardized testing can throw a wrench into that. The fact that every year, if the pressure ratchets up a little bit more and tests are increasingly more difficult, it takes away time to work on things like graduation portfolios [and big project-based learning in the classroom]. So, to me standardized testing is the biggest obstacle because it is important whether we think

it's a "valid" important or not. It's important [because] we have to deal with it.

White asserted that no matter how much democratic education that he did in his classroom, his job was directly tied to test scores as opposed to his pedagogy. In his view, this appraisal system limited the ways he could teach democratically. He explained, "My evaluation is tied to my test scores. The test is tied to the state curriculum, the modern curriculum and state standards." Much like Carr and White, other participants recognized that standardized testing had negatively impacted their democratic practice. Participants intentionally chose to focus instead on seeking to fulfill the bigger picture in preparing students to be democratic citizens. Beal expressed a contradiction between what the test measures and students' democratic needs:

> Yeah, I mean, that test is ridiculous because it's not even a reading test. It's a finding-an-answer test with "speed limits." It's not applicable to the real world, but yet it has real-world implications. I don't let myself think too long about it because if I did, I wouldn't be able to teach with as much success as I've had. I think a lot of teachers are just like "This is what I have to do." They can do other things in regards to democracy in education, to best practices, to student engagement, but yeah, they definitely have to do [the test] too.

From the standpoint of the participants, standardized testing has become one of the major focuses of the public education system. As such, it has had significant impacts on teachers' ability to engage in democratic pedagogy. Public-school teachers are required to educate students within an assessment-driven system—in the words of the participants, "teaching to the test" can very easily take away one's focus on democratic practices. However, likewise, they articulated that while this system is in some ways a hindrance to democratic pedagogy, it does not stop their moral obligation to find ways to engage students democratically.

Discussion

The overarching relevance of this study is embedded in the continued struggle for democratic education. When democratic education becomes uninteresting or considered an unimportant topic to discuss in our country and in our schools, then we have surrendered the future of an informed and educated democratic citizenry to the will of the neoliberal agenda. The narratives in this study represent the pedagogical work of nine teachers who dedicated themselves to democratic education. These educators are representative of the educationally possibilities of the democratic struggle in U.S. schooling. As a society, we cannot take for granted our responsibility to ensure our children are well informed and well educated about the principles and philosophical ideals of democracy. This comes by providing them democratic experiences in their classrooms. Here, we can provide our students the best opportunity to practice democracy, especially when the opportunities are found inside their schools. Our participants represent how a positive and powerful foundation of democratic citizenship can provide students with such experiences.

Mursell (1955) argued that if schools embodied dynamic programs that informed students about contemporary problems and how to experience the realities of democratic living, then it would be an "effective social instrument for the perpetuation and furtherance of democracy" (p. 147). In alignment with Mursell, Dewey saw the aims of an education grounded in democracy and the public goals it should attain as the answer to societal problems. Attaining these goals becomes problematic when the educational system shifts the focus from the experiential growth of the student to more metric-driven outcomes, from meaning-making to test-taking, and from seeking self-fulfillment to fulfilling external accountability measures. An education based on the principles of a Deweyan democracy increasingly seeks to support "a society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms" (Dewey, 1916, p. 99). As such, democratic education must seek to "become part of the bone and blood of the people in daily conduct of its life" where "democratic habits of thought and action are part of the fiber of a people" (Dewey, 1937, p. 462).

At its core, democratic education as a teaching practice brings student voice into the learning environment in an experiential manner. This is observed most closely in teaching democratic skills to students and allowing them the space to refine these skills. We agree with Dewey (1899) in that schools should be a microcosm of a participatory society. When working with students, teachers must keep in mind that students often come to the classroom equipped with varying degrees of experiences and differentiated ways of understanding those experiences. It is the role of the democratic teacher to create spaces in which these ways of understanding and experiencing the world are fostered through educative opportunities. Through democratic teaching, these educative opportunities seek out ways to value the student (Mursell, 1955).

The theme of democratic structure speaks to creating spaces in which students experience and exercise their own personal freedoms as citizens and individuals. Democratic education is necessary for preparing citizens who can interact in meaningful ways within a free democratic society. As students practice citizenry, they learn that being empowered does not mean disenfranchising others but is a collaborative process that addresses common concerns and challenges for all social classes and backgrounds (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970). In creating these democratic spaces—as microcosms of society—teachers actualize a model of the collective society. It is important to note, democratic education is not a laissez faire approach but operationalizes democratic spaces of practice where students have both control and freedom in their educational experience (Dewey, 1938). Likewise, participants in this study demonstrated that the democratic process of establishing structures in which students could work and of creating opportunities for student freedom and expression.

The implications of this study speak to the integration of the domains of preparation and practice for educators and educational leaders, as well as to educational research and policymakers. This research study calls for us to more fully acknowledge and appreciate the significance of the role that educational philosophy development has an educator's perception of their practice. We hold that this understanding can provide them the self-efficacy and autonomy to resist status quo policies and practices that oppositional to students being empowered by democratic education. Further inquiry is necessary to bring clarification to the question of how and why teachers and school administrators should be afforded the opportunity to develop democratic philosophies and values. For us, it is critical to understand the distinction among a federal mandate, a state policy, a school procedure, and an educator's democratic practice. Legislative policies, such as No Child Left Behind and Every Students Succeeds, are poor excuses for authentic pedagogical practices guided by a democratic teaching philosophy. Policymakers need to consider democratic structures in schools as an innovative pathway to meaningful reform. Similarly, these legislative measures are not a substitute for the hard work of educative values-based development on the part of educator preparation programs. The devaluing of democratic education under the neoliberal press via high-stakes assessments in U.S. schools and the continued assault on teachers' professional efficacy and autonomy creates a salient concern about the early preparation and initial educator licensure process without having fully explored their democratic philosophy and values.

In closing, it has been argued that the press of the neoliberal agenda with its value on punitive measures and competitive structures distracts democratic teaching and erodes democratic education (Atkinson, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Karaba, 2016). With the focus of legislative policies—such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and The Every Student Succeeds Act—and educational preparation programs that fail to emphasize democratic practices, the U.S. educational system has placed a premium on teacher practices that enhance educational outcomes that are often in opposition to authentic Deweyan democratic practices (Meier & Wood, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ravitch, 2013, 2016; Rothstein & Jacobsen, 2006; Wood, 2005). While we acknowledge that these obstacles discourage educators from practicing democratic pedagogy, participants in this study offered many important reasons why they continue to engage in the practice of democratic education. Instead of seeing the challenges to democracy as reasons to not engage in democratic education, participants saw these metrics, such as standardized testing and accountability measures, as issues that demand democratic spaces be created in their classrooms. In other words, they viewed these obstacles as driving forces that increase the demand for more democracy in education. Instead of asking if there is *room* for democratic education in the midst of these neoliberal barriers, participants in this study took it upon themselves to simply create their own spaces for democracy for their students.

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Appendix A

How Teachers Establish and Sustain Democracy and Education in Their Classrooms

Questions for SemiStructured Interview Protocol

1. How do you define democratic education?
   a. Has your definition changed over your time as a democratic educator? How so?
2. What makes an educator democratic?
3. How did you first learn about democratic education?
4. What made you decide to implement democratic education in your classroom?
5. What was the first step you took in implementing democratic education in your classroom?
   a. How did the building-level administrators (e.g., principals and assistant principals) react?
      i. Did you feel supported? Explain.
   b. How did the students react?
6. What democratic approaches/strategies have you tried that worked/did not work?
7. What obstacles have you faced from your institution(s) of public education (administration, policy, state-issued curriculum) in implementing democratic education in your classroom?

    a. How have you overcome these obstacles?

8. What obstacles, resistance, or setbacks have you faced from students, parents, and other teachers in implementing democratic education in your classroom?

    a. How have you overcome these obstacles?

9. In sustaining a democratic classroom, what approaches to classroom management and student engagement do you employ?

10. What advice would you give a novice educator in regards to establishing a democratic classroom?

11. What advice would you give an experienced educator who is working to sustain a democratic classroom in a public school?

12. In retrospect, would you have done anything differently to implement and sustain a democratic classroom?