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# Democracy & Education

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## The Morning Meeting

### Fostering a Participatory Democracy Begins with Youth in Public Education

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#### **Abstract**

There is a faltering sense of democracy in America's current political climate due to polarized opinions about leadership's decisions and antagonistic political parties. John Dewey (1916) proposed that education is the place to foster democracy, as schools can provide a platform to actively engage students in authentic democratic experiences that will empower them to act democratically beyond the walls of the school. The democratic schools that emerged during the Free School Movement of the 1960s and 1970s embody Dewey's philosophy, specifically with the shared governance occurring in their School Meetings. Unfortunately, American public education's present preoccupation with standardization, proficiency scores, and accountability in the name of equality creates an authoritative, top-down approach to teaching and learning that is far removed from the lived experience of democracy. Nevertheless, democratic schools' practices can offer insight for a space emerging in American public schools—the Morning Meeting. This paper proposes that the Morning Meeting is a 21st-century space with great potential to become a platform in public education that fosters participatory, empowered democratic citizens by allowing youth to experience decision making, agency, activism, and the equality that citizens must continually challenge American government to uphold.

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#### **Introduction**

**I**N AN ERA of unparalleled access to information and communication (Kennedy, 2017), Lincoln's description of the U.S. government as "of the people, by the people, for the people" (Cuomo & Holzer, 2004) in his 1863 Gettysburg Address has the possibility to become a vibrant reality. However, marginalization and oppression of groups has been present since European colonization of North America (Alexander, 2010; Au et al., 2016; Spring, 2016), and America has yet to represent a society in which

everyone—people of all colors, socioeconomic status, genders, and ages, including children—has been equally able to participate in decision-making processes (Alexander, 2010; Au et al., 2016; Butler, 1990; James et al., 1999; Spring, 2016). Democracy was designed to protect the freedoms of all people as well as challenge the

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government with citizens' legitimate concerns (Maddox, 2017). Yet reflecting the philosophy that democracy should be based on principles of mutual respect and cooperation, one may question whether America can uphold this ideal (Dewey, 1916; Dominguez, 2018; Obama, 2006; White, 2016).

Dewey (1916) proposed that democracy must first be a communicative, social discourse before it can manifest into political form. Further, democracy is an interactive style of lived social experience characterized by a collective group's co-construction of certain dispositions such as authority and freedom, responsibility and duty, compromise, reciprocity, and equality (Dewey, 1916; Kennedy, 2017). Dewey believed that schools can provide a platform for youth to actively participate in and practice democratic ideals and values and that educational curricula should be structured in ways that engage students in authentic democratic experiences that will empower them to act beyond the walls of the school (Dewey, 1916; Soares, 2013). Thus, it is appropriate for school systems in a democracy to be democratic and nonautocratic, with respect for the rights of students (Dewey, 1916/1968; Huang, 2014). However, in contrast to Dewey's philosophy, American education has historically been a method to deculturalize and control indigenous peoples, Africans, and later, Hispanic and other immigrant populations (Au et al., 2016; Spring, 2016). Native American children were taken from their families and sent to English-Christian boarding schools, had their hair cut, and given Christian names as a means to "civilize." African children were segregated in schools not offered equal resources and funding (Au et al., 2016; Spring, 2016). While education has evolved in significant ways, governing oversight and federal regulations continue to maintain a status quo that negates public education as a liberatory institution (Alexander, 2010). Despite the recent adoption of ESSA, which gives states more autonomy over standards and testing (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017; Ruff, 2019), American public education continues to value standardization, scores, and accountability. This creates an authoritative, top-down approach to teaching and learning where students are subjected to datafication in the name of equality (Greene, 2000; Meier, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Soares, 2013; Thoutenhoofd, 2018), far removed from the lived experience of democracy.

Yet there is a space emerging in public schools that holds great potential for teaching, practicing, and honoring the democratic values Abraham Lincoln famously spoke of; it is the Morning Meeting (Kriete, 1999). The Morning Meeting has proliferated in 21<sup>st</sup> century K–8 public education, often through the Responsive Classroom approach, and is meant to foster classroom community (Baroody et al., 2014; Responsive Classroom, 2019). Unfortunately, its potential is being stifled by the increasing use of the Morning Meeting as another space to teach academic standards (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Boyd & Smyntek-Gworek, 2012; Ottmar et al., 2013).

Participatory school meetings are not a new phenomenon. They have been a central, guiding component of many liminal schools that emerged during the Free School Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s (Mercogliano, 1998). These schools echoed a political backdrop of activism and unprecedented desire for free speech, equal rights, and need to challenge the state of democracy.

Guiding principles were grounded in the idea that schools should educate children so they can function in the American sociopolitical environment and, to do so, should reflect the basic structure of that system. As such, a democratic model of cogoverning shared by students and staff occurred through weekly School Meetings, and examples of these models thrive today.

By examining democratic schools' School Meetings and challenging the current use of public education's Morning Meeting, new ways can be illuminated for public education to promote participatory, active civic agents of American democracy. Dewey believed that the education of a group, no matter the form and content, socializes its members; moreover, it is the quality and value of the socialization that determines the habits and purposes of the group (Dewey, 1916). This paper argues that the Morning Meeting is a space to foster a new generation of participatory, empowered democratic civic actors by allowing children to experience equality, decision-making, and mutual respect on personal levels. Yet to situate this position, it is imperative to examine the political backdrop of the Free School Movement and the current political climate in this epoch of standardized testing to better, more deeply understand the implications of the Meeting then and now and how it can challenge today's political systems. From this exploration, a space can emerge that reframes the Morning Meeting as a setting of shared rights between adults and children. This may, in turn, lead to deeper, more authentic experiences of empowerment and equality—key components of democracy.

### **Political Events and the Free School Movement of the 1960s and 1970s**

The decade of the 1960s is marked as one with much turbulence in American history (Farber, 1994; Gaillard, 2018; Isserman & Kazin, 2000; Mercogliano, 1998). The era was shaped by major events such as the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, and Malcolm X (Farber, 1994; Gaillard, 2018; Matusow, 1984; Ward, 2010). The Cold War with the Soviet Union, the civil rights movement, and the escalating war in Vietnam created levels of tension in America that led to significant change and the progressive emergence of peoples' voice (Farber, 1994; Gaillard, 2018; Isserman & Kazin, 2000; Matusow, 1984; Ward, 2010).

When John F. Kennedy, a vibrant, young president, was elected, there was a sense of promise on the political scene. Attracting the highest rate of voter participation in 50 years, Kennedy's election returned leadership to the Democratic party after an eight-year lapse (Gaillard, 2018; Matusow, 1984). There was excitement for many that a new age of democracy had begun. The civil rights movement gained momentum, leading Black Americans to further challenge for equal rights under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. (Farber, 1994; Isserman & Kazin, 2000; Pearlman, 2019). Soon though, the era became overshadowed by the Cold War and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis that threatened nuclear war between the U.S. and Soviet Union (Farber, 1994; Matusow, 1984; Ward, 2010). Black Americans were met with violent resistance from Southern segregationists (Farber, 1994;

Isserman & Kazin, 2000; Matusow, 1984; Pearlman, 2019). And, on a November day in 1963, President Kennedy was murdered, leaving Vice President Lyndon Johnson as the new chief executive.

Johnson stepped in to lead a nation in shock and mourning, and a nation involved in war. While Johnson's support of the civil rights movement is regarded as his greatest achievement during his presidency (Matusow, 1984), he encountered trouble with his Vietnam policy as he began sending troops to Southeast Asia in increasing numbers to fight against communism (Ward, 2010). Americans began protesting U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and year by year, the number of citizens protesting significantly increased (Gaillard, 2018; Matusow, 1984). The level of Vietnam protesting was compounded by Black protests in the civil rights movement (Farber, 1994; Isserman & Kazin, 2010; Matusow, 1984). By 1968, the concern Americans had about democracy, equality, and the fate of the U.S. created high levels of foreign and domestic tension. American soldiers massacred hundreds of civilians in the South Vietnamese village of My Lai (Berkowitz, 2006). American citizens were massacred too: Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, and at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, blood was in the street from clubbing and tear-gassing antiwar protesters (Farber, 1988). President Johnson did not run for a second term (Ambrose, 1989; Farber, 1984).

Richard Nixon, the Republican presidential nominee who was a two-term vice president and lost the presidential race to Kennedy, won the election at the end of the decade (Ambrose, 1989; Berkowitz, 2006; Sandbrook, 2011). Nixon began his presidency presiding over an America where protests continued to escalate in size, voice, and frequency. Despite the 1973 end of the Vietnam War, Americans continued speaking out over issues of equality, civil rights, segregation and busing, gay liberation, and even parental rights to control their own children's education (Ambrose, 1991; Hall, 2008; Kreager, 2011).

Americans' faith in the federal government was further shaken by the 1972 burglary of the Democratic National Committee's headquarters in the Watergate office (Ambrose, 1989). The arrest of five men led directly to President Nixon, who was unable to hide his illegal activities related to the crime. Faced with impeachment, Nixon resigned from office—the first president to do so (Ambrose, 1991; Berkowitz, 2006; Sandbrook, 2011). The decline of trust, though, predated Nixon's Watergate scandal, with the assassinations of the 1960s, the tumultuous civil rights movement, and the effects of the Vietnam War. These events played a part in creating wavering faith not just in government but in authority and the collective and public life in and of itself (Berkowitz, 2006; Sandbrook, 2011; Ward, 2010).

These moments of the 1960s and 1970s were astounding in that every silo of American society, whether marked by political affiliation, race, gender, age, or ideology, was experiencing a shared same time and space through the events broadcast on the news, the music of artists such as Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix playing on the radio, and an incarnate, personal experience of uprising and war. The plurality of society at the time, as now, marked the good and the bad (Dewey, 1916). Within every society, the smaller groups are numerous, but when huge events occur in

history, a unifying, shared experience transcends the silos and brings the groups together as one.

### *Free School Movement*

The Free School Movement of the United States came about during these turbulent decades, but the idea and model of “Free Schools” originated with the Summerhill School in England, founded by A. S. Neill in 1921 (Peramas, 2007). Neill published his book, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, in the United States in 1960, which debuted during the week of John F. Kennedy's election (Croall, 1983). Neill's book was referred to as “the bible of the extreme romantics in the Free School Movement” (Miller, 2002, p. 55). *Summerhill* brought Neill renown through the 1960s and early 1970s with the book selling 3 million copies by 1973 (Taylor, 2012). *Summerhill* was included in over 600 American university courses (Croall, 1983). A further sign of the times—the publisher of *Summerhill*, Harold Hart, started the American Summerhill Society (Avrich, 2005). In 1968 and soon after in 1969, two American schools modeled after Summerhill were founded: the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts and, soon after, the Albany Free School. These schools were grounded in the philosophy that children subjected to an authoritarian, hierarchal education system would not be receiving effective preparation for being productive citizens in a democracy (Greenberg, n.d.).

These guiding principles align with Dewey's (1916) philosophy for democracy in education. Dewey viewed the democratic society as one that rejects external authority, and as such, society can create a substitute of associated interest and disposition through education. Through education, youth can experience that democracy is more than the way a society is governed—it is a way of associated living, of shared communicated experiences (Dewey, 1916). Neill's practices described in *Summerhill* both aligned with and challenged Dewey. Neill framed the meanings of the words “love,” “approval,” and “freedom” through a lens like Dewey's, and he turned away from the child being shaped as a “mass-man” who participates in a developed order of things. Rather simply, he wanted children to learn how to live happily. While Dewey drew from the philosopher Plato, who perceived individuals as contributing to the whole in which they belong, Neill grounded his work in psychology—in particular, Freud. One could perceive Dewey's view of the child as the child is part of a greater whole and is learning to contribute to the whole, while Neill considered the child as an individual whole in and of themselves. Though, like Dewey, Neill's teachings represent respect for freedom and negate the use of force, he believed that youth educated and raised by such methods will develop personal qualities of reason, integrity, courage, and love. While Dewey did not posit that a single ideal society could occur, he did propose that society could strive for an ideal by gleaning and practicing the best traits that do exist. Those traits include two elements: numerous points of shared interest and frequent open interaction between social groups with continuous readjustment as a result of new situations (Dewey, 1916). Neill's Summerhill society did indeed represent these practicable traits, as have its American offspring schools since.

**Summerhill.** Neill founded the Summerhill School in response to his own educational upbringing (Appleton, 1992). Rather than children being controlled by curriculum and fear, he wanted children to grow up in an environment where childhood was more than an enslaved condition and childhood could be enjoyed. At Summerhill, enforcement of morality that created inner conflict was removed, and students were free to do what they chose to do (Appleton, 1992). Neill (1960) stated, “Hate breeds hate, and love breeds love” (p. 8). The expression of love was cultivated through games, fun, and seeing the world through a child’s perspective. In contrast, the transmission of hate to a child came by teaching duty and obedience (Neill, 1960, p. 8; Peramas, 2007).

Importantly, Summerhill was self-governing through weekly General School Meetings where laws were made by every member, child and staff. Everyone’s vote counted, whether it was the youngest child or Neill himself. Equal voice was imperative. Any person could propose ideas, and the group would discuss it and vote. Members who broke school laws or interfered with others’ freedom were discussed at the meetings, and decisions were made by vote. What Summerhill created was a body of children who became actively involved in the life of their school community and exhibited intrinsic goodness (Appleton, 1992). This coincides with Dewey’s (1916) aims in education, which foregrounded equity. In an *inequitable* scenario, a social group’s aims are determined by external authority; aims do not arise from free experience or a shared process. However, at Summerhill, the aims of education belong in the communal process in which they operate, reflecting Dewey’s philosophy of educational aims which illuminates an equitable and shared process of education.

**Sudbury Valley.** The first American democratic school inspired by Summerhill, founded in 1968, was Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts. It thrives today as an accredited, ungraded, democratic day school that has students ranging from ages four to 19 (Gray & Feldman, 2004; Feldman, 2001). Sudbury Valley operates in response to three beliefs about traditional education: (a) traditional education ignores a child’s ability to make educational choices; (b) traditional education is punitive to a child; and (c) traditional education is psychologically damaging to a child (Peramas, 2007). To this end, one of the school’s most essential features is the absence of curricula. Academic requirements are nonexistent, as are schedules and assigned groups. Learning initiative is expected to come entirely from the students along with their desire to associate with each other, from the youngest students to the oldest. Days are directed with autonomy, whether that means socializing and playing or studying, attending classes alone or with others, following a plan toward a future goal, or being spontaneous (Feldman, 2001; Gray & Chanoff, 1986).

The heart and guiding activity of Sudbury Valley’s democratic community is the weekly School Meeting in which every staff member and student regardless of age has a vote (and voice) in matters of how the school is operated. For example, the School Meeting is responsible for creating school rules, discussing the school’s budget, proposing classes, and selecting school officers and administrative staff (Feldman, 2001). An agenda is published

prior to the meeting, and standards of procedure are adhered to, with the primary goal of creating a fair and efficient democratic administration of the school (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). Attendance at the School Meeting is voluntary, and studies have shown that the older students and staff attend faithfully, but high-interest issues will attract a crowd (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). However, the number of attendees is not a concern. Although every student and staff of the community must have equal right, each person is free to exercise them differently depending on interest, personality, age, and other factors.

**Albany Free School.** In 1969, Mary Leue, after consultation with Neill, started the Albany Free School (Gribble, 2004). The founding year of the school coincided with the agenda of the era and “breaking down the increasingly monolithic control of major social institutions such as the public school system” (Mercogliano, 1998, p. 26). Thus, the Albany Free School aimed to create authentic alternatives to the public model of education that had been “corralling the minds of American children for the past century” (Mercogliano, 1998, p. 26). Albany Free School is a small, pre-K–8, private school whose main goal is to circumvent the hierarchical, top-down approach found in public schools. Like other free schools, Albany Free School designed an environment meant to foster students’ natural inclination towards learning and where children grow at a rate unique to themselves (Mercogliano, 1998).

A critical component of the Albany Free School is its approach to school management and discipline (Mercogliano, 1998), which was adapted from the Summerhill General School Meeting. The Albany Free School’s Council Meeting serves as the school’s primary tool for management and discipline with the purpose of providing staff and students an arena where they are able to publicly and collectively address social conflicts and school policies (Mercogliano, 1998). The Council Meeting is unique in that it can be called at any time during the day so issues can be dealt with as they happen. The guiding principle behind this level of spontaneity is that by discussing and resolving issues in the school community, the students will cultivate a desire and ability to actively participate in the democratic process (Mercogliano, 1998). Furthermore, the practices of the Council Meeting stem from the belief that students will come to value cooperative and peaceful approaches to resolving conflict rather than the use of aggression, dominance, or fighting (Mercogliano, 1998).

**Brooklyn Free School.** A 21<sup>st</sup> century model of democratic schools is the Brooklyn Free School. Founded in 2003 by a group of parents and teachers who believed New York City needed an alternative educational choice, the Brooklyn Free School is a pre-K–12 private, democratic, free school, which currently serves over 80 families (Brooklyn Free School, n.d.). The school offers a sliding tuition scale to include all socioeconomic backgrounds and describes itself as having a diverse population in terms of race, ability, income, and background. (Brooklyn Free School, n.d.; Huang, 2014).

Like its predecessors, a weekly meeting is the “heart and soul of Brooklyn Free School” (Brooklyn Free School, n.d.). With the school’s Democratic Meeting, the whole school body assembles to share announcements, commend each other, voice concerns, and

work to take responsibility for the well-being and governance of the school. Through these meetings, students learn to develop and endorse proposals designed to address school issues and solutions. Students chair the meetings and all students and staff have an equal vote in decisions (Brooklyn Free School, n.d.).

Social justice is a key component to Brooklyn Free School's culture, which highlights a contemporary model of the democratic free school. Middle and high school students participate in weekly social justice seminars. These seminars are described to be a "pursuit of understanding historical and contemporary representations of social justice. The themes and topics of education, gender, race, class, and sexuality are covered to explore facets of oppression and actions for justice" (Brooklyn Free School, n.d.). In these arenas, students participate in inquiry related to social, cultural, and institutional responses to oppression and inequality.

McReynolds (2008) described her visit to Brooklyn Free School as one that induced a feeling of tranquility that she had only experienced, up to that point, in the natural world. Despite the activity and movement and sounds of children and staff in all of their various activities, almost in helter-skelter fashion, McReynolds felt a sense that she was connected with a natural order of the universe when inside the school's building in Brooklyn, New York. The author reflected: Do schools mirror the natural world? When children are free to learn their own way, at their own pace, in a safe, loving environment, does this reflect a natural order (McReynolds, 2008)?

McReynolds's observations of the Brooklyn Free School may transcend to reflect each of these reviewed free schools and the way each uses a school meeting as the hub of governance and community building. Each school's meeting indicates a natural order of community building, social learning, and knowledge making based on equality, respect, listening and understanding, and the democratic ideal that groups come together frequently for common interests and to navigate new situations (Dewey, 1916). The School Meetings reflect Neill's seminal practices of individual freedom and shared governing, and they importantly represent aspects of Dewey's (1916) aims of education, with focus on process over a means to an end goal.

### Political Climate of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Public Education

Today, like the 1960s and 1970s, public trust and faith in government's leadership stands on shaky ground characterized by antagonistic media coverage, frequent accusations of lies (Dreier, 2017), the current president's unprecedented use of Twitter (Hult, 2018; Schier & Eberly, 2017), and a polarized population of citizens (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; *The Economist/YouGov* Poll, 2019). The Twitter post in Figure 1 demonstrates the ongoing contentious dialogue related to untruths and allegations occurring during President Donald Trump's service in office. Neill (1960) stated in the introduction of his book *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*:

*The difficult child is the child who is unhappy. He is at war with himself; and in consequence, he is at war with the world. The difficult adult is in the same boat. No happy man ever disturbed a meeting or*



Figure 1. Donald Trump Tweet (Trump, 2019b)

*preached a war, or lynched a Negro . . . No happy man ever committed a murder or a theft. No happy employer ever frightened his employees. All crimes, all hatred, all wars can be reduced to unhappiness. (p. 1)*

Whether there is or is not a clear beginning to the discourse that has become common today surrounding government and democracy, what can be surmised is there is an air of unhappiness and discord.

Trump lost the popular vote in the 2016 presidential election by over 3 million votes (Maddox, 2017). Trump's presidency began with a handful of missteps, including beginning efforts to ban immigrants from several Muslim countries, allegations of sexual misconduct, and interference by Russia in the 2016 election (Crotty, 2018; Schier & Eberly, 2017). Trump unilaterally issued more executive orders than any president since Harry Truman in his first 100 days in office (Schier & Eberly, 2018), reversing Democratic policies on health care, energy, environment, and employment relations. Additionally, Trump announced U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Accord (Hult, 2018; Schier & Eberly, 2017). As Trump resides as leader of the United States, many of his hostile pronouncements and Twitter posts challenge the spirit of democracy in unprecedented ways, particularly when he directs his attention to minorities in the population (Maddox, 2017). Candidates who follow this pattern of degrading democratic discourse, as shown in Figure 2, pose great risks to future democratic governance (Dominguez, 2018; Pomper, 2016).

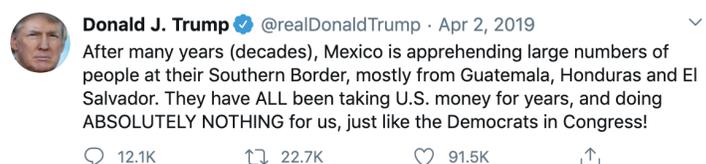


Figure 2. Donald Trump Tweet (Trump, 2019a)

Echoing the protest movements in the 1960s and 1970s, many established progressive organizations as well as countless new groups are engaged in peaceful resistance against Trump's anti-democratic efforts (Dreier, 2017, 2020). Key concerns of these groups include: translating the rise in activism into reducing harm from executive orders; creating an electoral force that aids progressive Democrats; and keeping grassroots movements alive by training new leaders and candidates that aim to advance issues of equality, immigration, environmental justice, and public education (Dreier, 2017, 2020). Efforts like Occupy Wall Street, Dreamers' immigrant rights movement, Black Lives Matter, fights against the Keystone Pipeline, the Fight for 15, and the fight for marriage

equality are each examples of fresh waves of activism (Dreier, 2017, 2020).

An upsurge in progressive group membership and contributions has been seen since the 2016 election (Dreier, 2017). For example, the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) dues-paying membership went from 400,000 to 1.4 million, with an additional million on its email list, and raised more than \$50 million within the first 15 months of Trump's election (Dreier, 2017; Folley, 2018). Similarly, the number of MoveOn.org's members who made monthly contributions more than tripled to \$75,000 right after the 2016 election (Dreier, 2017). In American culture, Super Bowl commercials for Coca-Cola and Budweiser, among others, promoted diversity and tolerance in response to Trump's attacks on immigrants, Muslims, and others (Dreier, 2017; Hunt, 2017). Well-known figures in media and the entertainment industry like Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, Alec Baldwin, John Oliver, and Meryl Streep have joined the resistance against the presidency and his policies despite the Twitter tirades that have resulted from it (Dreier, 2017; Symons, 2019).

No event in years has inspired more American protest than Trump's rise to power (Dreier, 2017, 2020), further polarizing Americans on the large scale of political affiliations to the small scale of neighbors, friends, and family members. Indeed, President Trump has garnered public support from a large percentage of the American public (*The Economist/YouGov Poll*, 2019), and as such, a polarization persists between those who consider themselves Trump supporters and those who do not (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). Polarization in politics, though, is a common phenomenon, where Americans disagree on a spectrum of issues such as the war in Iraq, taxes, abortion, immigration, guns, trade, gay marriage, and education policy (Obama, 2006). These current and long-standing points of contention emphasize the ever-present need to focus on teaching youth how to engage in productive, respectful, generative discourse. Generative discourse can thus be a congenial process of mutual and associative efforts to continuously respect one another rather than to have an end goal of proving right or wrong, winning or losing (Dewey, 1916).

### ***No Child Left Behind and Standardization of Public Education***

America's most recent presidency has brought on a spike in political activism, but it is not an anomaly for the federal administration to implement decisions and changes that produce large-scale effects. Public education, specifically, has seen one of the most influential and largest reforms in American history with President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (McGuinn, 2016; Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). NCLB, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), mandated that states develop academic standards and test students in grades three through eight and in high school annually in reading and math. Districts and schools were held accountable for results (McGuinn, 2016; Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). NCLB was the first national law to impose consequences on American schools based on children's standardized test scores (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). Initially, NCLB was lauded as a way to bring

about educational equality by raising and expecting the same level of achievement for all students across the U.S. through high-stakes assessment and accountability (Soares, 2013). However, the preoccupation with the end goal of increasing test scores has become public education's norm—at the expense of meaningful curriculum that aims to focus on the processes of education and learning as experiential (Dewey, 1916), which enhances a democratic way of life (Soares, 2013). Furthermore, NCLB has not been successful in its goal of raising student test scores/achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2010b; Markowitz, 2018; McGuinn, 2016; Whitney & Candelaria, 2017).

When Barack Obama, a member of the U.S. Senate with one of the most liberal voting records, came into the presidential office, many expected he would accept criticisms of NCLB expressed by many Democrats, some of whom were in influential teacher unions. However, the hope for a divergence from strict school accountability was squashed when President Obama acknowledged acceptance of much of the Bush administration's accountability movement (Darling-Hammond, 2010a; McGuinn, 2016). Early on, Obama called for continued annual testing and increased federal efforts to intervene with low performing schools and teacher accountability (Stout, 2009). During Obama's two terms, he led the federal government in more intervention efforts in education than in any other policy, other than health care (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). He created competitive grant programs such as Race to the Top, School Improvement Grants, Investing in Innovation, and an NCLB waiver process. This continued top-down approach by federal administration received push-back led by Lamar Alexander (former Secretary of Education), who advanced the congressional reauthorization of NCLB (McGuinn, 2016). This, in fact, resulted in a shift away from NCLB with the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which Congress passed 85–12 in the Senate and 359–64 in the House (Klein, 2016; McGuinn, 2016). ESSA officially replaced NCLB in the 2017–2018 academic year (McGuinn, 2016). ESSA still maintains annual testing and reporting requirements of all students grades three through eight in math and language arts and once in high school and testing in science at three points in time (McGuinn, 2016). ESSA also preserves states' obligation to publicly report schools' test score data, disaggregating for different subgroups (special education, racial minorities, English language learners, and students in poverty). However, ESSA does return more state control over K–12 public education by allowing greater flexibility in the implementation of standards and testing, such as substituting the SAT or ACT for a state assessment in high school, and it requires that states select other measures of school quality (McGuinn, 2016; Ruff, 2019; Whitney & Candelaria, 2017).

Because standardization and high-stakes testing have shown to cause a decrease in student engagement over time and engagement predicts both achievement and social-emotional well-being (Markowitz, 2018), scholars suggest that policymakers and researchers must work to guarantee that ESSA facilitates systems of accountability that promote engagement (Markowitz, 2018). Markowitz (2018) discovered the possibility that distal, federal policy changes can impact students' personal experiences with

their education and recommended including indicators of students' engagement as a measure of success. Markowitz argued that this change could allow states to reduce negative influences of the continued strict testing environment while fostering other indicators of students' growth and success. Placing a focus on student perceptions of school experiences can be a guide for future designs, as well as examining what features of schools are associated with high student engagement and how educational policy helps or hinders schools' efforts to build relationships with students and support their development (Markowitz, 2018). These recommendations pave a way for democratic spaces, such as the Morning Meeting, that afford students' increased agency, participation, and equality. Neill (1960) noted that when children feel free, they experience an absence of fear (p. 17). Furthermore, the absence of fear in schooling is one of the most liberating things that can happen for a child (Neill, 1960). In today's schooling, fear may be a result of subordination, marginalization, and high stakes testing.

### **The Morning Meeting**

Markowitz's (2018) arguments and Dewey's (1916) and Neill's (1960) seminal and progressive ideas support an engaging process of learning, the infusion of co-generative dialogue and governing, and the pursuit of individual happiness, perspective, talents, and interests as a way to contribute to greater society and pursue happiness. These philosophies speak to the possibilities of the Morning Meeting for public schooling. The Morning Meeting can be an arena for high levels of student engagement and a platform for experiencing Dewey's democratic ideals and Neill's philosophies of freedom. These can be experienced, for example, by participating in cooperative intercourse with other groups (Dewey, 1916) and when a child's vote counts the same as an adult's when making decisions (Neill, 1960), as shown through democratic school practices. At this point in time, the public school Morning Meeting does not mirror democratic schools' governing School Meetings; however, it has the potential to manifest into a practice that educates youth to be civic actors in a democracy.

### ***Morning Meeting in Public Education***

Gray and Richards (1992) explored the Morning Meeting in an ethnically diverse third-and-fourth-grade classroom. The authors described their Morning Meeting as a time for the classroom community to share personal news and discuss problem-solving strategies. The teacher took on a polyphonic role by participating, moderating, and at times, writing students' ideas on a chalkboard. Gray and Richards found that the teacher had great influence over the classroom's turn taking, and the meetings had great influence over the school's lived democratic values (Gray & Richards, 1992).

Responsive Classroom, created to improve classroom social environment, emerged not long after Gray and Richard's study of the Morning Meeting and presented a framework developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children that aimed to foster the growth of the whole child (Charney et al., 1997). As part of its framework, Responsive Classroom developed a format for the Morning Meeting that can be seen in today's versions of public school

classroom meetings. This format includes a formal greeting, sharing time (news of interest and responses to each other), a group activity that promotes participation, and lastly, news and announcements that detail events of the day as told through a posted daily message. This format was designed to promote a community of respectful and caring learners (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Bruce et al., 2006; Kriete, 1999). Moreover, this agenda creates a time and space for democratic practices within the context of the group activity that promotes participation. Such participation can be modeled after School Meeting practices and can even become a place where youth may challenge current structures, practice generating discourse about how they are governed, and generate ideas of how they can contribute to their community based on individual and collective strengths and talents (Dewey, 1916).

Skills such as active listening, articulating ideas to others, reaching consensus, and respecting others' views are vital to working as a cohesive group and are skills that can be isolated during Morning Meetings (Gardner, 2012). Morning Meeting helps prepare children for responsible citizenship (Bondy & Ketts, 2001) and develop a feeling of safety and freedom in the classroom community (Bruce et al., 2006), just as democratic schools' School Meetings do. The Morning Meeting extends beyond academic emphasis (Bruce et al., 2006) when freedom, safety, and equality are promoted and the process becomes the focus rather than a prescribed outcome.

With the psychological understanding that feelings of safety foster learning achievement (Bruce et al., 2006), the public school Morning Meeting has diverged from the basic principles of promoting citizenship towards being another tool for teaching in the current era of high stakes testing. In Bondy and Ketts's (2001) study, the authors posed the question: Could the Morning Meeting help third-graders to excel on their state-mandated exam? This beginning shift from the essence of the Morning Meeting toward a more controlled use for academic results is evident from studies emerging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Boyd and Smyntek-Gworek (2012) stated that an awareness of literacy standards underpins the way teachers in their study planned the structure, pacing, and routines of the daily Morning Meeting. Rimm-Kaufman and colleagues' (2014) large-scale randomized-controlled field trial with second-through fifth-graders punctuated this shift toward using the Responsive Classroom approach (and all of its elements) as a means to improve academic achievement with their focus on finding academic gains in reading and mathematics. An additional study done using Rimm-Kaufman and colleagues' (2014) data focused solely on mathematics, finding the Responsive Classroom program predicated teachers' increased use of inquiry-based mathematics practices compared to educators at control schools (Ottmar et al., 2013). Thus, it is evident that the Morning Meeting is shifting to being used as another tool for measured academic achievement, when it could be a powerful space to provide experiences of democratic participation, governance, citizenship (Power, 2014), and even resistance against the status quo.

## *What Morning Meeting Can Be*

There is significant value in fostering youth engagement for educational institutions (Cook-Sather, 2007; Lodge, 2005; Yonezawa et al., 2009). As students are situated in school contexts as “insiders,” they have understanding and access to knowledge about what works and what does not (Yonezawa et al., 2009, p. 203). Student knowledge is oftentimes information to which adults are not privy (Levin, 2000) and can provide insights the adult perspective does not have. Levin (2000) argued that including youth dialogue at the classroom level, on school committees, and on governance boards can influence classroom-, school-, and district-level policies. These 21<sup>st</sup> century practices of engaging students in educational change reflect the Free School Movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Levin 2000; Yonezawa et al., 2009). A resurgence in the student voice movement can mirror the current response to today’s political environment and uphold Dewey’s (1916) position that greater civic engagement at every age in school and the greater community fosters the development of participatory and justice-oriented citizens beyond the walls of the school (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a, 2004b).

The development of justice-oriented citizens is modeled by the Brooklyn Free School and can be developed in the public arena as shown in Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004b) work with the Bayside Students for Justice. The teachers of this program aimed to foster students as activists “empowered to focus on things that they care about in their own lives and to . . . show them avenues that they can use to achieve real social change, profound social change” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004b, p. 14). Moreover, the program successfully sought to educate students about addressing issues of injustice and inequity and cultivate social change.

Facilitating youth engagement is not without challenges (Yonezawa et al., 2009). The occasional clash between well-meaning adults and students needs mediation. Youth need assistance learning to improve communication between one another when they disagree, especially in the primary grades, when language and communication abilities are still developing. Furthermore, like adults, children embody varied cultures and political perspectives, and these divisions between all school members can lead to struggles over the direction of collective work and who gets to define it (Fielding 2001; Yonezawa et al., 2009). Bragg (2001) discussed how challenging it can be for teachers and administrators to truly listen to students’ opinions, especially when those adults disagree. Oftentimes, when attempting to promote student engagement, intended or unintended adult domination and false opportunities can impede the process (Mittra, 2001, 2004; Yonezawa et al., 2009). As can be seen in the shifting uses of the Morning Meeting from a space to foster citizenship and community toward being another tool for achievement, Lodge (2005) warned that efforts to promote authentic student engagement can range from the promotion of active student participation to relatively passive involvement. Critical engagement projects can sometimes be more about improving the organization and less about developing the youth and adults within those organizations (Lodge, 2005).

Dewey (1916) believed in the nature of experience as a critical part of education, which includes both an active and passive element. Experience is synonymous with trying, doing, and being passive (that is, simply undergoing). Furthermore, trying and doing require change, but for change to be meaningful, it must be consciously connected with the return of consequence that comes from it (Dewey, 1916). The more dialogic adults and students are, the greater the likelihood a community of democratic and critical engagement is produced (Lodge, 2005) and more widespread changes in education can occur. While the audience of the Responsive Classroom Morning Meeting is commonly geared toward elementary and middle grades, participatory engagement of youth can be fostered at every age through the strategic use of inclusive meetings that are run on the guiding belief that all members’ voices are important and have power.

The Convention on the Rights of Child challenges educators to not just respect children’s rights but to also prepare children to become responsible, participatory political agents in a free society (Power & Scott, 2014). Based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 2007 UNICEF publication, *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All*, there is possibility for educational reform. Both documents highlight that children have *both* “a right to education” and “rights within education” (Power & Scott, 2014, 51). “This includes rights to be heard and due process (Article 12), freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14), and freedom of assembly (Article 15)” (Power & Scott, 2014, p. 51). Approaches to educating children for democratic citizenship ought to consider how these rights can manifest in children’s daily experiences in school.

Unfortunately, while the U.S. contributed to the drafting of the Convention and commented on most of its articles, proposing the text of seven of them, America has yet to ratify it (Gainsborough & Lean, 2008; Walker et al., 1999). A controversial tenet of the Convention is the participatory rights grants to children (Mason, 2005), with Article 12 stating:

*Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child . . . The child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child. (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2009)*

Article 12 illuminates the goals of the democratic schools’ School Meetings; it can illuminate new processes in public education. The Morning Meeting in education can embody the belief that children, when given responsibility to manage themselves, their community, and their learning, will in fact rise to the challenge (Neill, 1960). This personal responsibility, the intrinsic motivation for leaning, and the desire to be a positive member of a community are evident from the success of students who have graduated from the democratic schools that have endured since the 1960s (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). Public education’s Morning Meeting offers the space to honor children’s political agency in terms of sharing

control over the way they are governed, taught, and tested. During this devoted time in the school day, students can convene to discuss topics such as: learning objectives and assignments; rules of the classroom and school, policies at the district, state, and national levels; new ideas for projects and learning initiatives that extend beyond the walls of the classroom; and desired communications with administrators and other community leaders, all while working through disagreements and negotiation in congenial ways.

Political agency can be further developed within the space of the Morning Meeting as a site of resistance in a way that mirrors the peaceful protests of the 1960s and 1970s. Examples of this are already occurring. The March for Our Lives student-led demonstration on March 24, 2018, when students walked out of schools across the country to protest gun violence, was one of the largest youth protests since the Vietnam War (Lopez, 2018). Their Mission and Story states: “Inspired by the Freedom Riders of the 1960s, we toured the country on the road to change” (March for Our Lives, 2020b). The youth-led group garnered a 79% increase in young voters in 2018 and now has its own Youth Congress (March for Our Lives, 2020a, 2020b). In another example, in March 2019, 40 high school girls entered a Maryland high school administration office to challenge the mild disciplinary actions imposed on a male student for rating and ranking female students’ physical appearance numerically (Schmidt, 2019). This, in turn led to a school-wide meeting with students and staff to discuss the issue openly and honestly and, later, a campaign to teach younger students about the need for mutual respect between men and women (Schmidt, 2019).

Planned resistance can be youth led and can represent what is critically important to their lives. One day news reports may describe a peaceful protest against state-mandated testing—a walkout across the nation on testing days. Posters made will exclaim Dewey’s philosophies: “We want to experience learning, not tests! We want to be a part of the policy making, not part of the data!” When youth have the opportunity to make decisions about issues related to their education, they can begin to build the participatory and associative mindset that civic actors of future America need. Perhaps the biggest obstacle is the long-standing marginalization and subordination of children. The U.S. has not ratified the UN Rights of the Child, thus signifying an attachment to the adult-authoritarian mindset. The Morning Meeting’s potential is contingent on a shifting adult perception that children’s experience and perspective is valuable, worthy, and even critical for change. The Morning Meeting can become a honored platform situated during the school day to practice the democratic ideals posited by Dewey (1916) and Neill (1960) and modeled by the School Meetings of Summerhill, Sudbury Valley, Albany Free School, and the Brooklyn Free School.

## Conclusion

American government continues to misrepresent the potential of democracy. This is evident by centuries of explicit marginalization and oppression of minority groups (Au et al., 2016; Spring, 2016); contention between political parties; polarization of stances on

social issues (Obama, 2006); and the excessive control of public schools through high-stakes testing, the datafication of children, and accountability (Greene, 2000; Meier, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Soares, 2013; Thoutenhoofd, 2018). These critical issues create implicit barriers to youth’s experience of basic democratic principles and becoming democratic in nature. Dewey stated, “Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experiences” (Dewey, 1916, p.101). Democratic schools, with their School Meetings, provide students the opportunity to understand how a democracy operates and foster democratic dispositions in children. In contrast, public schools use the Morning Meeting as a small space for students to build community and to directly incorporate and teach preplanned learning objectives, often to increase test scores. Students are not afforded the same opportunities to engage in co-generative discourse, disrupt inequities, and attempt to enact change and resistance. The potential for the Morning Meeting can come to fruition through the spread of knowledge about its potential and exemplars of modeled practices.

In line with the slow return of state agency from ESSA and the current political resistance movements, the Morning Meeting can become a place for fostering youth agency and engagement, community, and participation in decision-making in public education. A change toward allowing students to practice democratic citizenship, affording them greater voice about school policies, discipline, classroom procedures, and their own learning, may foster a participatory generation that elects leaders who embody mutual respect and equal rights to every human, creature, and the earth itself. Public education can respond to today’s political backdrop just as the democratic school did in the 1960s and 1970s, creating a new era of radical change and greater equality for all.

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