
Democracy & Education

Without a Philosophy, Chaos Ensues.

A Book Review of *When Kids Rule the School:
The Power and Promise of Democratic Education*

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Introduction

AS PART OF an education course called Democracy and Education at Bucknell University, this group has chosen to collaboratively coauthor this book review. Our class has run itself democratically; we collectively determined our syllabus, wrote our assignments, delivered course content, and designed our grading schema. This is just one way we have attempted to disrupt traditional faculty-driven and top-down models of knowledge transmission. We represent varied p-12 educational backgrounds and political positions to offer a cogent review of *When Kids Rule the School: The Power and Promise of Democratic Education* by Jim Rietmulder.

Beyond reading this Rietmulder's text carefully, we also made a half-day visit to the school to see the curriculum in action, interact with students and staff, and observe the use of space. While we are aware that any visit will represent a fraction of the many years and experiences that are catalogued in the text, what we saw on this day contrasted significantly with the achievements of The Circle School outlined in the text. In what follows, we work to separate the concerns and insights that arise from our visit from those directly related to the text and note for readers clearly where the two inputs differ from one another. Two main critiques arise from our read of the text and our visit: (a) we found the explicit focus on "freedom from" practices typical of public schooling to be lacking in its co-constitutive aim of building a democratic



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JIM RIETMULDER

community, and (b) the practical philosophy of the school based in enforcing their Lawbook seemed an insufficient a philosophical grounding for shaping collaborative behavior to produce learning.

Aims of the Book

Author Jim Rietmulder is a founding staff member of The Circle School, where he has been a part of the school community for the past 34 years. He operates as a sort of headmaster/principal for the school, though no official position such as this exists. Prior to The Circle School, Rietmulder held a variety of professional positions including a history magazine editor, business analyst, software developer, and management consultant. His perspective is one of an intertwined parent/educator/staff member, as his own children attended the school.

The book outlines the progressive approach and daily activity of The Circle School, informed by Rietmulder's substantial history with the school. It begins with two sections focused on describing what self-directed democratic schools are and making the case for

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their necessity. Next, Rietmulder articulates how learning looks different under democratic organization versus a conventional public school arrangement. The last half of the text peers into The Circle School specifically by exploring the heuristics of the school system and the daily life of students and staff. In these sections, Rietmulder spends considerable time familiarizing readers with the lexicon of The Circle School and offering deep descriptions of the governance systems (elections, School Meeting, the Judicial Committee, the Chore System) that undergird daily life. Reading the text set us up for understand what we saw in our visit quite well; we were able to observe a sex education class and a session of the daily Judicial Committee and witnessed students completing some of their chores. The book rendered a rather complete picture of the school and its workings and thus gave us a real-time picture of what “doing self-directed democratic learning” looked like at The Circle School.

The intended audience for the text includes parents, educators, and scholars, according to Rietmulder. Parents are likely to find the book approachable in its organization and tone, with its accessible descriptions of school values and practices interspersed with vignettes. Educators and scholars are likely to be perplexed by the text’s lack of references to educational theory or philosophy. Indeed, the first two sections of the text (“Self-directed Democratic Schools” and “A Case for Democratic Schooling”) lend themselves to a fuller connection to educational philosophy serving as the foundation for decision making and communal development. This absence was a deep disappointment for us as readers who are interested in how the practical pursuits of “democratic education” can draw from a philosophical background offered by thinkers such as John Dewey (most obviously). Moreover, during our visit, when asked about the philosophical background for decision-making at the school, Rietmulder and others appeared to be proud of what they felt was their unique orientation to democratic, self-directed learning, purposefully unhooked from philosophical thinking.

Rietmulder’s primary claim is that the “old” education system is exhausted, thus requiring a “reinvigorated educational system: self-directed democratic schooling” (p. xii). By “old,” Rietmulder means standard public schooling, where, from his point of view, the biggest problem is that students are not free to make decisions about how to spend their time, direct their own learning, and participate in the governance of their school. “Freedom from” the unnecessary constraints of mass public schooling in order to allow students to be “self-directed” learners is a central curricular and organizational aim of The Circle School.

Benefits/Pros of the Argument

Before exploring some of the limitations of the text and concerns that arose regarding the type of democratic community sponsored at The Circle School, we do want to examine some of the particularly positive aspects of the education we read about and saw during our visit: the emphasis on nature, the power of play, and the focus on developing the student voice.

The physical layout of the building and grounds, coupled with the emphasis on “freedom from” the strictures present in

conventional public school, allows each student and staff member to take advantage of the benefits of nature throughout the day. Rietmulder tells several stories that foreground the importance of being outside and learning the lessons available in nature in unscripted ways. This emphasis on nature connected to another valuable lesson from the text: the power of play. The text reiterates time and again that students follow their own natural instincts and frequently find what other children would claim as “schoolwork” to be play, lodged in a voluntary sense. These values advance another strength of the text: the emphasis on developing student voice. Throughout the text and during our visit, we remarked on the ways in which students communicated with staff, visitors, and each other in direct, honest, and authentic ways. The text’s focus on self-direction is clearly linked to the use of one’s voice to determine desires and plans for how to spend time.

Critiques of the Book

Our main critique is the lack of guiding philosophy of the school detailed in the text. The default philosophy of the school seemed to be an oppositional one against public school, manifested in “freedom from” the confines of public school. We maintain that this is an insufficient philosophy, one that overlooks the needs of individual democratic rights to be coupled with community responsibilities. Without a philosophy for building community, members are left with the sense that their liberty is the primary goal, overlooking the importance of interdependence that allows students and staff to trust one another and work toward collaboration to contribute to mutual learning. Such a philosophy would acknowledge both liberties and responsibilities, two sides of the same coin. As such, a philosophy becomes a pillar that students and staff can lean on in good and bad times, and should be able to explain why decisions are made at the school. Being able to refer to a set of values can give rationale and motivation for actions made by members of the school.

Rietmulder makes scant connections to democratic philosophies that could guide decision-making to balance freedom and responsibility. While the structures of the school are similar in some ways to A. S. Neill’s Summerhill, Rietmulder does not reference any philosophy that the school draws upon for guidance. Rietmulder’s own writing about community (which comprises just one page of the entire text directly) claims that he and the other staff are more interested in creating “agency in community,” by which he means “. . . both the web [of person-to-person connections] and its warmth, and also ‘society,’ the ‘exterior’ of community, its institutions: systems, structures, customs, and protocols; such as Lawbook, judicial processes, chore sign-up, bus time bell, shoe bucket, rag bin, sales table, social scripts . . .” (p. 62). The Lawbook of The Circle School is indeed a good example of a component of the school that could rely more heavily on values. Currently, the Lawbook grows as violations not yet encountered suggest new rules. Rietmulder claims with pride that the evolving school rule book now numbers over 200. Here, we see opportunity for a greater emphasis on community that could guide individual behavior in addition to mere rules. Utilizing a strong philosophy that manifests school values could answer the “why are we doing

this?” question. Instead of following rules for the sake of following rules, there could be learning opportunities and emotional growth for those who break rules, and a stronger sense of community as a whole.

This failure to connect his ideas with educational philosophy will likely be surprising to educators and scholars. Throughout the text, there are limited references to educational philosophies broadly or democratic educational philosophies specifically. We found it especially surprising that there was no reference to Dewey, as many of Rietmulder's ideas fall in line with this important American educational philosopher. For instance, Rietmulder writes extensively about how important it is for The Circle School to set up a space that mirrors that of a real-life society. This is an idea that Dewey explored in *Democracy and Education* when he critiqued modern schooling as artificial in its emphasis on “object lessons.” Dewey argued that it is necessary for learning to be purposeful to a student and that such generative learning begins with their curiosity. Generating such intrinsic motivation as a guide for student learning is another overlap between Dewey and Rietmulder, though the latter makes no reference to the former as support for this aim. Similarly curious to us was the overt distancing of parents from the workings of the school. While we understand Dewey to maintain that school needs to be the student's learning home, it seemed strange to us that Rietmulder would be so strident in his view that, except in rare cases, there is no reporting whatsoever between the school and the parents. Indeed, when we visited the school, Rietmulder claimed that the parent of a current student had applied for a staff position and that the student would be consulted before leadership moved ahead with the application. He indicated that if the student said they would be uncomfortable, then the parent wouldn't proceed in the hiring process.

Together, this lack of reference to educational philosophy and a focus on rule following versus the building of freedom within the context of community left us feeling that there was a tendency toward a spirit of noncompliance for the sake of contrasting their practices with those of conventional schools. Indeed, the text and visit reminded us more of homeschooling advocate John Holt's philosophy of unschooling than communal approaches to democratic education. After becoming dissatisfied with conventional schooling, Holt began his work crafting a philosophy of human development in the absence of the confines he believed circumvented the natural processes of the human mind. Embraced by progressive homeschoolers, Holt's philosophy attempts to magnify the capacities of the human intellect without imposing narrow thinking that, from his estimation, comes from time spent in schools. Our read of the text is that unschooling is more akin to the practices of self-direction central to The Circle School. Should this be the case, linking their practices to a larger philosophy would strengthen the case for this approach.

In all, this book is an interesting read for nonspecialists and parents potentially interested in enrolling their child at The Circle School. As a form of scholarship embedded in the larger literature of democratic education, it is lacking. The book remains useful as an example of how interested parents and teachers might fashion “democratic” schoolings, and yet the picture that it paints of a self-directed school is different from that which we had in mind as a form of democratic education, as informed by our study of Dewey.

Reference

Rietmulder, J. (2019). *When kids rule the school: The power and promise of democratic education*. New Society Publishers.