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Participating in Democracy: Creating a Culture of Citizenship in Primary Classrooms

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Abstract

This study explores development of civic participation in children in primary grade classrooms. It examines how teachers and administrators create a culture of democratic participation that nurtures young children's developing civic competence and embodiment of the rules, rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship; and how young children enact these rules, rights and responsibilities within the classroom. Obstacles and challenges faced by schools in achieving these goals within the current political and socioeconomic environment that frames education in the U.S. are also explored.

In order for a democratic society to thrive, its citizens must be actively engaged participants in the civic life of the community.

Hart (1992) states that a democratic society depends upon the sustained and meaningful civic participation of all people at all levels of decision-making. The question is: how do young children who are accorded neither the rights nor responsibilities of adolescents or adults—learn to become actively engaged participants in a democratic society?

The Participatory Democratic Classroom

As young children are not often given the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the very decisions that directly impact their lives, where do we begin when teaching the skills of civic awareness and engagement? What lessons will build the foundations and how do we introduce young children to complex ideas of how the world works—e.g., economics, politics, environmental sustainability and social justice—in developmentally appropriate ways? How do children learn what they need to know to become democratic citizens concerned with the welfare of others and capable of making decisions that recognize both the rights of individuals and the responsibilities of society?

A primary (K-2) classroom designed to function as a participatory democracy, while still recognizing the cognitive and social boundaries of young children, presents a unique opportunity for children, through engagement in everyday activities and interactions, to develop a sense of how to participate in a diverse community organized to address the needs of many (Dewey, 1937, 1939; Hancock, 2017; Payne, 2018). In such a classroom, children are accorded dignity and respect. Their opinions are valued, and they are given opportunities to participate in real decision-making. A high level of inquiry and analytical thinking is maintained, which enhances decision-making in all areas of the curriculum. Teachers encourage openness to diverse ideas and interpretations, as well as critical reflection of societal policies and problems. Differences in age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and ability are viewed as enriching the learning community. The knowledge, attitudes, and values that minority students—those outside the traditional culture of power—bring with them into the classroom are given equal weight and importance (Beane & Apple, 1995).

However, within the U.S. educational system, power is not shared equally between teachers and students, teachers are not autonomous within their classrooms, and administrators do not get to choose how teachers and students are assessed. In addition to these limitations on autonomy and choice, young children are viewed developmentally as cognitively limited in understanding and ability and, therefore, not capable of taking part in important decisions regarding their welfare. Thus, school as a cultural institution presents an experience that can be profoundly disempowering for young children. When children's unique voices and perspectives are shut out of the educational context in which they are expected to learn, they may see themselves as less competent, less capable, or less worthy (Nieto, 1999). Alternatively, they may consciously reject the system that devalues them and choose not to participate in learning activities within that system (Kohl, 1994), thus reinforcing the status quo of the hierarchical power structure within the school and society at large (Willis, 1977). According to Delpit (2006), issues of power are continuously enacted within classrooms and are “a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power” (p. 24). Although democratic practices are not inherent within the structure of either the U.S. educational system as a whole, nor of individual schools or classrooms, implementing such practices in a developmentally appropriate manner would seem to be an important means of providing children with opportunities to

experience democracy in action and to practice the values and skills of citizens in a democratic society.

The Classroom as a Community of Practice

As noted by Stetsenko (2008), Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky viewed cognition as a dynamic and coordinated activity, a collaborative and ongoing process of transformation, wherein “active engagement with the world...represents the foundation and the core reality of development and learning, mind and knowledge...” (Stetsenko, 2008, p. 479). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning within a community of practice as a process of engagement with more experienced practitioners in authentic and meaningful activities with shared common goals. A participatory democratic classroom can be viewed as a community of practice within which children are learning to engage as active citizens.

As Matusov, Bell, and Rogoff (2002) note, schools “cultivate patterns of discourse” (p. 5) that institutionalize the values, beliefs, and traditions of society. Participation in the activities of school is, essentially, a process of enculturation. Through participation in communities of practice within the classroom, children learn how to engage with the social, political, economic, and cultural practices of the wider communities within which the classroom is embedded. Thus, when schools support a collaborative approach to teaching and learning—encouraging children to work together toward common goals, to listen to one another, to build upon each other’s ideas, to provide guidance when necessary, to be accountable to the learning community as a whole—children are learning important aspects of citizenship in a democratic society.

However, since the 1990s the civic mission of public elementary schools in the U.S. has been subjugated to the limited goals of increasingly rigid high-stakes tests and standardized curriculum (CIRCLE & Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003; Levine, Lopez, & Marcelo, 2008). It can be argued that one influential factor was the publication in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk*, a report that broadly condemned the existing educational system and advocated “more rigorous and measureable standards” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 25). The response at all levels of educational policy-making was a move toward standardization of both curriculum and testing and a narrow focus on reading and mathematics (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Levine et al., 2008; Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer, & Wood, 2004). The broader goals

of education in a democratic society are left to history, government and civics classes in the middle schools and high schools (CIRCLE & Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003; Levine et al., 2008); however, in doing so, our educational system ignores the importance of developmental context. If we truly care about increasing the civic awareness and engagement of young adults, we need to discover the roots of developing civic competencies in primary grade classrooms.

Guiding Questions of the Research

This study was designed to uncover those elements in a primary classroom that create a participatory democratic learning community that will support and advance a young child's developing sense of civic awareness and engagement, as well as the barriers to achieving such a learning community. The research had two interrelated goals: (1) to examine how teachers and administrators create a culture of democratic participation that nurtures and sustains young children's developing civic competence and embodiment of the rules, rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship; and (2) to document how young children come to understand and embody these rules, rights, and responsibilities embedded within the daily functioning of the classroom. The study also explored the obstacles and challenges faced by teachers and administrators in these schools in their attempts to achieve these goals within the political and socioeconomic environment that frames education in the U.S.

Methodology

My methodological approach draws upon transformative theories of learning and development that posit the developing child as an actor within a world of embedded meanings. Each school—and each classroom—is viewed as a community of practice. The enactment of democratic principles in the classroom was the unit of analysis: ideology and practices of democratic learning communities, as well as how these principles and practices were embodied within the activities of teachers and children.

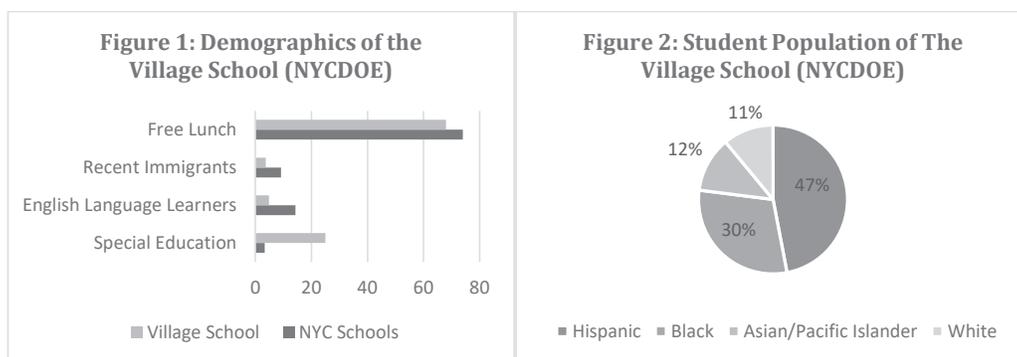
Stetsenko (2012) describes a post-objectivist approach to research, a transformative activist stance (TAS) that posits collaborative transformative practice as a primary force in human development and social dynamics. Research cannot be value neutral because we change the world we are investigating by the very act of our engagement, by the questions we ask, by “posing questions about how things are and by

envisioning them being otherwise and acting on these visions” (p. 194). My goal in undertaking this research was to explore the possibilities within primary classrooms of creating a culture of citizenship, even within the realities of the current educational environment, to seek out democratic principles embedded within the activities of children and adults in the classroom.

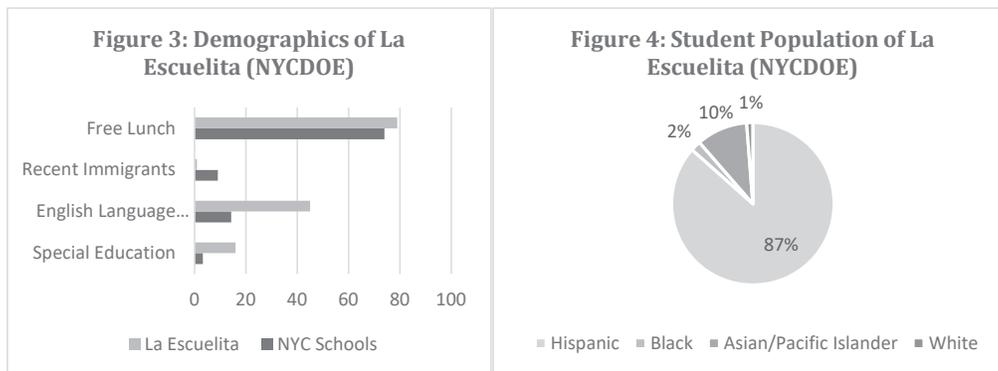
Participants

Participants were the students, teachers and administrators of two New York City public schools that serve socioeconomically and ethnically diverse urban populations in two different communities. Each school is dedicated to a democratic educational philosophy that emphasizes respect for the open flow of information and ideas, social justice, and equal opportunity for all children. I have changed the names of the schools and people included in the study. Thus, I will refer to the two schools as The Village School and La Escuelita del Corazón.

The Village School is an alternative school located in Manhattan that serves children from PreK-Grade 6 (See Figures 1 & 2). Modeled on successful progressive schools, it was the first parent-teacher collaborative school established in this lower east side community. The parent/school/community relationship is an essential component of the educational philosophy, while social action and community involvement shape and guide the curriculum.



La Escuelita del Corazón, located in Queens, serves children from PreK-Grade 2 (See Figures 3 & 4). Although a magnet school for the arts, La Escuelita is essentially a community school that draws 90% of its students from the surrounding neighborhood. School philosophy emphasizes a collaborative educational environment and introduces the concept of an educational family that is mutually responsible for children’s academic achievement.



Data Collection

Over a five-month period at each school, I conducted detailed observations of the daily activities in which teachers and children in five primary (K-2) classrooms engaged, as well as informal interviews and conversations with students, teachers, administrators, and parents within the school community. At the Village School I observed a first/second grade classroom with one teacher and one student teacher. At La Escuelita, I observed two kindergarten classes, one first-grade class, and one second-grade class. One kindergarten class was a bilingual/ICT class with two cooperating teachers and a paraprofessional. The other three classes were dual language classes with one teacher. Classrooms in both schools had a total of 21-25 students.

During the months that I spent in each of these schools as a researcher, I often spent early morning hours, lunch period, prep periods, and after-school hours with teachers, student teachers and paraprofessionals. I also spent considerable time with the principal, assistant principal, and curriculum specialists in both schools. During the time that I spent with them outside the classroom, these participants were very open in their conversations and often took particular care to explain or enlarge upon various issues. I learned from teachers in both schools that children were familiar with the concept of citizenship, which was a vital part of the schools' mission statements and curricula. The term "citizenship" was used regularly in both schools.

In each classroom, children quickly accepted me as a "participant observer" in the daily activities. Upon first entering each classroom, I explained my reason for being there and invited children to ask questions at any time. Children at all grade levels expressed interest in my note taking, which would often initiate a conversation, as children volunteered their interpretations of events I had observed and shared other experiences. The following questions provided the lens through which I observed daily classroom activities:

- How do teachers and students collaboratively transform a primary grade classroom in a school committed to creating a participatory democratic learning environment?
- How do participants define their roles within the school community?
- How does the school function within the broader community?
- What are the affordances and boundaries to achieving active democratic participation in a New York City public school classroom embedded within the current sociopolitical and economic systems?
- Does standardization of curriculum and assessment limit the goal of achieving active democratic participation?
- What is negotiable?
- What is not?
- How are the required elements of curriculum implemented?
- Do children have the opportunity to take ownership of their learning?
- What problem-solving strategies are available for children's use?
- How do administrators and teachers act to create a sense of community within the school and within each classroom?
- Is dialogue encouraged between students and teachers and among students?
- Do children initiate dialogue? What is the scope of the dialogue?
- Whose voices are encouraged? Whose voices are silenced?
- Are there opportunities for participation? Engagement? Decision-making?
- What cultural scaffolding is provided to help children become active participants?
- How do children deal with conflicts?
- Do they understand that people have different perspectives?
- What tools are children given to develop the ability to express their viewpoint?
- What conflict resolution strategies are available to children?
- How is space/time organized/utilized?
- Is there flexibility?
- Is there freedom of movement?
- Who is involved in deciding upon and implementing classroom rules?
- Do teachers follow the same rules as students?
- How is it decided whether a rule should be changed?
- What happens when classroom rules are broken?

- Is there a balance and connection between the rights of individuals and of the community?
- Do children have a sense that they can make a difference within the community?

Analyzing the Data

To analyze the data, I created an array of descriptors regarding the ideological framework that informs the practices of administrators and teachers in participatory democratic learning communities, how teachers and administrators enact these principles, and how these principles and practices are embodied within the activities of children. Taken together, these form the basis of the classroom culture within which children learn about citizenship.

Ideology: The first part of the equation

Ideology is defined as the underlying principles—intentions, expectations and aspirations—that shape and inform teacher practices within the broader mission of the school. Teachers should be able to articulate democratic principles in discussing their pedagogical beliefs and in reflecting upon observed practices in the classroom. These philosophical principles should include:

- **Open discourse:** Teachers understand that complex issues have more than one interpretation and all voices are given equal weight in the dialogue;
- **Respect for the individual:** Children are viewed as having a right to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives;
- **Inclusiveness:** Children's differences are appreciated as a positive force and their achievements are recognized and valued;
- **Concern for human rights:** Children are encouraged to question existing institutions and power structures that reinforce inequities and to seek strategies for change.
- **Teacher practices:** How democratic principles are implemented. A focus on ideological principles can help to identify a school's or teacher's commitment to democratic practice. But principles do not always translate into practice. In order to understand what children are learning about democratic participation and civic engagement in the classroom, it is also necessary to examine how teachers implement these democratic principles within the classroom. To understand how ideology translates into practice, I examined power structures and rules within the classroom;

whether teachers engaged children in authentic dialogue; how teachers organized and utilized the physical and temporal space; and how teachers and administrators negotiated constraints such as mandated curriculum, standardized assessment, and embedded evaluation systems. I observed how teachers used curriculum, literature, music, and role-play to encourage perspective-taking, and whether they modeled the skills needed for collaboration and participation.

- **Enactment:** How well does it work. How well do young children assimilate a sense of democratic participation and civic engagement within the classroom community and enact those principles in their day-to-day activities? What measures can we use to identify the beginnings of civic engagement in children whose understanding of the world is at the level of the tangible and material? Although it is important to provide children with ample opportunities to reflect upon their actions, young children often cannot clearly articulate abstract concepts such as democracy in explaining their actions. Therefore, I focused on how children enacted democratic principles and the extent to which they actively created their own unique views of citizenship. I examined whether they respected the rights of their classmates and whether they participated in creating and transforming the culture of the classroom community; whether they used classroom rules and practices with one another; and whether they ever questioned, resisted or subverted rules. I observed whether they included those who were different from themselves as equal members of the classroom community and whether they recognized their own abilities as individuals to make a difference.

Findings

Education is an inherently political activity (Beane & Apple, 1995). Public schools link generations, transmitting the cultural practices and power structures of the society within which they are embedded. Bourdieu (1974), Willis (1977), Delpit (2006) and Kozol (1991) have all described public schools as a conservative force, recreating and reinforcing social patterns of privilege and exclusion. Yet Freire (1970) maintained that public schools could be a force for positive transformation, empowering students to strive for social justice, while Dewey (1916) believed that public schools have the responsibility to nurture this vision of a just society.

I observed both conservative and transformative forces within each classroom as teachers and children co-constructed their communities of practice. What children knew and understood about democratic practice became evident by analyzing how they engaged within the classroom setting; what teachers and administrators perceived as democratic participation became evident by analyzing how they defined spatial and temporal affordances and boundaries and how they formulated and enforced rules. The day-to-day decisions of administrators, teachers, student teachers and paraprofessionals sometimes provided children with opportunities for action and decision-making, and at other times limited and controlled those choices. Collaborative workspaces, freedom to move about the classroom and choose where to work, open access to communal supplies, and accessibility and use of spaces outside the classroom were factors that influenced the sense of community and democratic citizenship in each school and each classroom.

Several interrelated themes emerged from the data. In each school and each classroom, these elements helped to create a participatory democratic learning community supportive of children's civic engagement. Interwoven within these themes are core elements of democratic citizenship, from which a conceptual model of democratic practice emerged (See Figure 5) that can be implemented in primary classrooms to support children's civic awareness and engagement.

Figure 5: Participatory Democratic Classroom Model

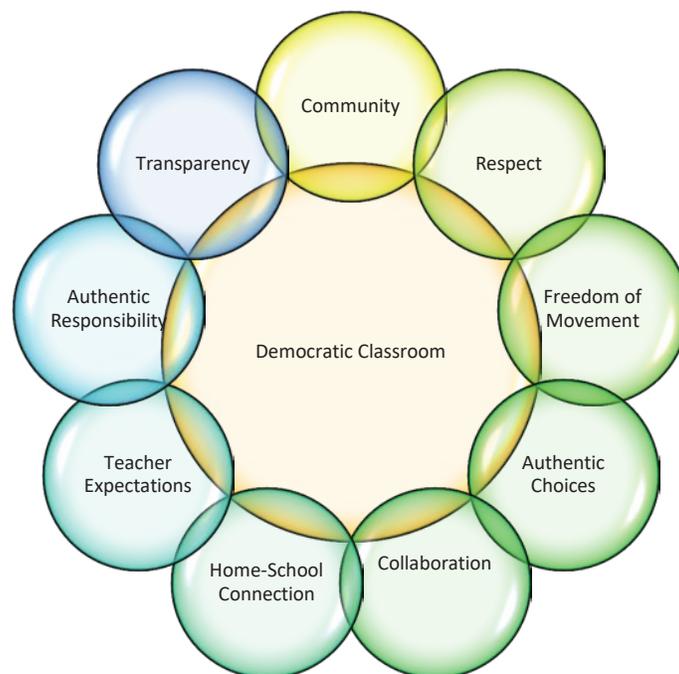


Table 1 presents a brief description of the themes that emerged from the data, while the following sections provide examples that elaborate on each theme. In selecting the events used to illustrate each of the elements that contribute to a democratic classroom culture, I chose examples that were representative of discourse, actions, and interactions that I observed many times throughout the months that I spent in each school and each classroom.

Table 1: Themes of a Participatory Democratic Classroom

Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children learn to balance individual rights and community needs • Teachers model compassion and empathy • Teachers encourage, model and scaffold collaborative effort • Children learn to negotiate shared spaces and supplies • Children take responsibility for each other and the group as a whole • Children are encouraged to value different perspectives
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers model and scaffold active listening • Teachers encourage open discourse • Teachers create respect for personal and shared space • Teachers model and scaffold respect for differences of ability and support children’s accomplishments
Freedom of Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children have authentic choices about where to work and freedom to move about the classroom during lessons • The classroom affords a range of opportunities and work spaces • Lessons extend beyond the classroom walls, using hallways, outdoor spaces and the surrounding community as learning spaces • Materials are accessible and available to children at all times
Authentic Choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers share power with children, allowing children to participate meaningfully in decision-making that affects their lives • Children participate in setting individual goals for academic achievement and behavior
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants at all levels of the school hierarchy engage in collaboration, both formal and informal • Administrators and teachers discuss impacts of changing educational policy initiatives and plan together for implementation and compliance • Parents and students participate in school decision-making • Children engage in collaborative learning activities • Teachers welcome and actively mentor student observers and student teachers

Home-School Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and administrators welcome parents/guardians into the school community and into the classrooms to participate in a variety of ways • The school maintains strong ties to the community and is committed to meeting the needs of parents at all socioeconomic levels • Meetings are scheduled at times of the day when working parents can attend and interpreters are provided when necessary • Parents with young children who cannot arrange for babysitting are accommodated • The school offers adult education programs to help parents support their children: homework help, support for emergent readers, technology classes, and adult ESL classes
Teacher Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers view children as capable of choice, independence, responsibility and decision-making • Teachers give children opportunities to resolve their conflicts, with the teacher acting as facilitator • Teachers provide scaffolding and tools to help children learn how to make decisions, to collaborate and to solve real problems
Authentic Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children have authentic responsibility within the classroom community and take these responsibilities seriously: class jobs, cleanup, classroom materials, conflict resolution, peer tutoring • Children take ownership of social responsibilities to maintain the physical space of the classroom and the school
Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and administrators introduce transparency into the hierarchy of power and authority • Administrators attempt to provide authentic opportunities for parents, teachers and children to participate in decision making • Teachers view themselves as participants in the classroom community and hold themselves accountable to class rules • Teachers acknowledge their mistakes and are willing to change their decisions • Community rules and responsibilities are fully and clearly explained in developmentally appropriate language • Children participate in creating and implementing classroom rules and share in decisions about consequences when rules are broken • Teachers and students honestly examine instances of unequal application of rules and inconsistent teacher expectations • Children are encouraged to question existing power structures • There are times when children subvert the rules, choosing to honor community and collaboration

Community

At both schools, teachers engaged in daily interactions that helped children learn how to balance individual rights with the needs of the community, how to work cooperatively and help each other to succeed, how to negotiate shared spaces and supplies, and how to take responsibility for each other and for the community as a whole.

Robyn, the first/second grade teacher at The Village School, never removed a child from the meeting space because of behavioral issues. Instead, she used phrases such as “You are part of this community” and “We are responsible for one another” in attempting to mediate peaceful resolutions to conflicts. In one instance, when Max, a first-grader, pushed another child at the meeting space, Robyn allowed him to explain why and then directed everyone’s attention to the class rule about not hurting anyone’s body or feelings. Robyn told Max, “We care about you, that’s why we want you to learn the rules for getting along in school.” She then asked, “What can we do to help you so that you don’t feel angry about following the rules? You need to help us by letting us know what to do to help you.” This was typical of how Robyn engaged children’s cooperation and participation, creating a sense of community.

Teachers modeled and practiced compassion and empathy, and children learned to value and appreciate different perspectives and diverse abilities. I also noted many instances when children transformed the classroom environment by exhibiting compassion and empathy in their interactions with classmates. The following vignette from a kindergarten class at La Escuelita will illustrate:

Emiliano was a child with developmental delays. Most of the children in the class seemed protective of him. They also included him in their social groups and extended their friendship. At the meeting space one day, I noticed Karla gently stroking his back when he seemed a bit lost, not participating in the lesson. One morning when the children were called to gather at the meeting space, Emiliano did not move. He was standing in one spot and seemed a bit confused by the activity in the room. Alicia gently took his hand and led him to the meeting space. On another occasion, I observed three children who sat at the same table with Emiliano attempting to guide and scaffold him in writing his name. In fact, his classmates were often so eager to help Emiliano with his tasks that the teachers had to remind them to let him try by himself, so that he could learn.

Ms. Amaro and Ms. Carreno emphasized compassion and cooperation in their interactions with one another and with the students, as well as in explicit conversations throughout the day, using phrases such as “You can do this together. Help each other.” When working with Emiliano, the teachers differentiated his instruction while he sat with his tablemates. The children were used to seeing Emiliano receiving extra help and it is likely that this had an impact on their interactions with him.

Respect

Teachers also emphasized respect in creating a sense of community. Children learned to listen to the ideas and concerns of others, to value their right to opinions with which they may disagree, and to find ways to compromise. Children cared for shared space and supplies and were considerate of others who were also using that space and those supplies.

Classrooms at La Escuelita and The Village School provided accessibility and learning opportunities for all children, and children with special needs were included and supported in general education classrooms. Teachers and administrators demonstrated respect for individual differences and supported children’s accomplishments. Progress was measured against a child’s previous work, rather than in relation to a “normalized” standard.

Teachers also modeled patience in group lessons and explicitly articulated the concept that some people need more time to process information and understand, telling children “It’s okay, let his mind take its time” or “She’s thinking. Give her a chance.” Children at the meeting space engaged in lively discussions and, for the most part, did not talk over or interrupt each other. They listened to each other’s contributions, responding and elaborating on one another’s answers in a true dialogue.

Children were encouraged to take academic risks without fear of failure. Teachers were comfortable admitting mistakes and actively encouraged children not to be afraid to try, that we learn from our mistakes. During one lesson at The Village School, when Bhreyion responded incorrectly to a question, he nodded and said, “I made a mistake. Everybody makes mistakes.” He then tried again, this time giving the correct response.

Freedom of movement

Children at La Escuelita and The Village School had authentic choices about where to work and freedom to move about the classroom during lessons. Materials were accessible and available, and classrooms offered a range of opportunities and work spaces. During independent work, children could be found working at collaborative tables, at the meeting space, at the learning centers, or simply scattered in various corners of the room. Children moved easily and quietly about the room without disturbing their classmates.

La Escuelita was designed as an early childhood school. Every classroom had a sink with a water fountain, as well as an individual bathroom or a bathroom shared with another classroom. Children did not need to ask permission to use the bathroom or to get a drink of water during whole group or independent lessons, which allowed greater freedom of movement and greater autonomy. In each classroom there was a system in place (such as a Stop/Go sign) that allowed children to easily determine whether the bathroom was free.

Lessons often extended beyond the classroom walls. The two first/second grade classes at The Village School engaged in collaborative learning activities in which children from both classes could be found working together in the hallways outside the classrooms or moving freely between the two classrooms when working on projects. Both schools also used the surrounding community as a classroom. Students from La Escuelita, a magnet school for the arts, performed at the high school next door and the community center across the street several times during the year. Students from The Village School helped maintain two community gardens and took weekly excursions to the neighborhood park throughout the year to study the natural environment.

Authentic Choices

Children from both schools were included in setting individual goals for academic achievement and behavior and in meaningful decision-making that had an impact on their lives. Administrators and teachers were confident in sharing power and trusted children's ability to make decisions and resolve problems, as noted in this example from the Village School:

One morning, Natalie and Willa approached Robyn, and Willa asked, "Can we find some time this afternoon for choice time?" She spoke about how hard the students were working and said that they

could use some “downtime.” When the children returned from lunch and settled into place for the afternoon meeting, Robyn opened the floor to discussion, referring to the afternoon schedule. “What do you think,” she asked, “Can we make some time this afternoon for choice time? Where can we make room in the schedule?” The students began to discuss ideas and offer suggestions. Robyn listened and moderated until they came to a consensus that they might take 20 minutes from their social studies block if everyone worked efficiently and stayed on task.

It was interesting to note that Willa asked, “Can we find some time,” implying equal status, rather than privileging responsibility for making the decision to Robyn. Children also participated in developing and implementing classroom rules, deciding upon consequences, and engaging in problem solving and conflict resolution. One incident that occurred during recess—an altercation that involved four students from Robyn’s class—illustrates important elements of a democratic classroom community:

When the students returned from recess, Robyn gathered the class at the meeting space and explained that each child would have an opportunity to tell his story without interruption while she documented it. When each child was finished, Robyn read his story back to him to check for accuracy and asked questions to clarify. The discussion lasted for 50 minutes and, throughout, no child interrupted or shouted out. Although it was clear that they were all upset, each child spoke calmly, and the others listened quietly and attentively. Robyn also spoke quietly and emphasized that they needed to understand, as a community, what had happened and to respond to it. The next morning the principal, Lara, met with the four children and they discussed what had happened. She asked them what they thought should be the consequences of their actions, and they decided together how to move forward. Robyn and Lara also spoke at greater length with the other students in the class, giving them the opportunity to share their reactions to the incident and their thoughts about what the consequences should be.

Collaboration

Lara and Ms. Gutierrez, the principals, respectively, at The Village School and La Escuelita, nurtured a culture of collaboration. They were willing to share ideas, materials and expertise, and to call upon teachers, parents and students to participate in decision-making. Both Lara and Ms. Gutierrez shared with their teachers the problems and constraints

they all faced as a result of the turbulent social and political landscape of public education in New York City. Educational policy initiatives at federal, state, and local levels were discussed in meetings where teachers and administrators planned together for implementation and compliance.

Teachers were invited to share their expertise at school-wide seminars and grade-level curriculum meetings. Ms. Gutierrez held meetings with teachers at each grade level to discuss the requirements of the formal teacher performance assessments mandated by the New York City Department of Education and, whenever possible, gave teachers an opportunity to provide input into the form of the assessment. Parents, teachers, students and administrators at The Village School all participated in biweekly Town Meetings, held in the multipurpose room and designed to explore issues, large and small, that were important to the school community.

Teachers at La Escuelita and the Village School were strongly committed to collaborating with colleagues and to mentoring pre-service teachers. During a conversation at the beginning of the school year, Ms. Amaro affirmed that community and collaboration were “the way of the school” at La Escuelita, not just for the children, but for the teachers as well. “We have each other’s backs,” she told me. Teachers planned together, co-taught, and shared ideas, supplies and pedagogical knowledge. This philosophy of collaboration was not “just words,” but enacted on a daily basis. Teachers actively mentored student teachers, engaging them in the day-to-day life of the classroom, sharing ideas and curriculum materials, providing guidance and feedback on lesson plans and opportunities to teach, and encouraging them to find their own voices in the classroom.

Teachers also afforded students opportunities to participate in decision-making at levels that were developmentally appropriate for each grade. They discussed the daily schedule, responded (within their ability to make changes) to students’ concerns and provided transparency into the hierarchy of the school curriculum. Teachers viewed students as capable of taking responsibility and encouraged them to share their expertise with one another in collaborative learning activities and during independent work. The following vignette is an example of authentic collaboration and community problem-solving at The Village School:

During one Town Meeting, two teachers raised a problem: noise from students entering and leaving the shared school bathrooms was

distracting for their students. After discussion, the school community decided to undertake a research project to determine the busiest times of use. Second-graders from both first/second grade classes worked together to gather data and present their analysis at the next Town Meeting. After they presented their analysis, the moderator opened the discussion to everyone at the meeting—teachers, students, parents and administrators—to explore possible solutions.

Home/School Connection

Parents and guardians participated in a variety of ways to support the goals of their school community, while each school was strongly committed to meeting the needs of parents at all socioeconomic levels. The parents and guardians with whom I spoke at both schools felt they were given real opportunities to participate in their children's education. For example, parents maintained a strong voice in the day-to-day decision making at The Village School, actively contributing their ideas and opinions at the biweekly Town Meetings.

Parents were often in the classroom, reading to children, working one-on-one with children who needed extra help, sharing their expertise with regard to a particular topic or lesson, and sometimes teaching lessons developed in collaboration with the teacher. When the students were learning about communities as part of the social studies curriculum, Robyn invited parents to come in to talk about their work or about community work in which they were active.

Teachers and administrators at La Escuelita maintained a strong commitment to teaching children—and their parents—how to achieve success within what Delpit (2006) calls the “culture of power.” The parent coordinator's office was welcoming and accessible, located just inside the main entrance of the school. Parent workshops were scheduled for morning, afternoon and evening to accommodate varied work schedules. Evening programs for parents—technology classes and adult ESL classes, as well as classes designed to teach parents how to assist their children in reading, writing and completing homework assignments—were well attended and informative. Parent participation at those meetings was lively, with many questions and comfortable discussions among parents, teachers and administrators.

Teacher Expectations

Teachers at The Village School and La Escuelita viewed children as competent, independent learners capable of assuming responsibility

and making choices. Children were full participants in the classroom community, empowered to express their thoughts and ideas and to develop their own viewpoints.

Teachers provided scaffolding and tools to help children learn how to make decisions, to collaborate with one another, and to solve real problems. Robyn continually reinforced that students had ownership of their actions and that it was within their power to change their behavior: “You have power over your day.” She told me that young children need a true and deeply-rooted understanding of rules, rights, and responsibilities in order to engage in meaningful and authentic learning. In Robyn’s classroom, community rules were organic, evolving through use, and subject to revision as needed. There were reasons and resolutions included with each rule.

Ms. Marquez, a second-grade teacher, actively fostered the children’s independent problem solving and conflict resolution. If students approached her with a dilemma, she would listen and then say, “Well. So, how are you going to solve the problem?” She encouraged the students to see other perspectives and to support their arguments. She facilitated but did not offer solutions; instead she empowered her students to find solutions. She listened actively, validated their different perspectives by reflecting back to them what they said and helped the children to come to a resolution that was mutually satisfactory. There was an atmosphere of trust in this classroom; trust between Ms. Marquez and the students and also students’ trust in one another.

In Ms. Ramirez’s first grade class, children spent several weeks exploring the question “What does cooperation mean for our community?” They read stories and discussed the ideas within the stories, making connections to their own lives to create meaningful constructs of cooperation. They then created a mural, which included thoughts such as “Cooperation means to be respectful to one another” and “Cooperation means helping each other and sharing and caring for each other.” Ms. Ramirez often referred to the ideas captured within this mural when talking with the children about classroom community.

Authentic Responsibility

Children had authentic responsibilities within the classroom community and took these responsibilities seriously: class jobs, cleanup, care of classroom materials, conflict resolution, and peer tutoring. Many class jobs included a high level of responsibility; for example, in Ms. Ramirez’s class, the care and maintenance of the laptop computer

cart and in Robyn's class, calling children to line up when it was time to leave the room. A sense of community responsibility, embodied by the children's maintenance of the supplies and materials of the classroom, was widespread in all of the classrooms. Children helped one another and their teachers without being asked and without drawing attention to their actions.

On various occasions, I observed different children clean up spills for which they were not responsible, pick up and replace projects that had fallen from where they were hung, and pitch in to help others when they had completed their own tasks. At the beginning of the school year, Robyn and the students worked together to clean and organize the extensive block area to prepare for future projects. Various groups were enthusiastically engaged in the tasks of counting, labeling, cleaning, and organizing blocks.

Transparency

Although public schools in the U.S. are inherently hierarchical, teachers and administrators at La Escuelita and The Village School introduced an element of transparency into the hierarchy of power and authority. Working within the limitations of the educational system, administrators attempted to provide authentic opportunities for parents, teachers, and children to participate in decision making. Teachers viewed themselves as participants in the classroom community, subject to the rules and willing to acknowledge their mistakes. Community rules and responsibilities were fully and clearly explained in developmentally appropriate language, and children were empowered to participate in creating and implementing rules, to re-examine and revise rules when necessary, and to share in decisions about consequences when rules were broken.

Children were encouraged to question existing power structures and teachers honestly examined instances of unequal application of rules and inconsistent teacher expectations. Robyn, for example, was open and forthright in discussing issues of power and hierarchy. She spoke with me about how confusing it was for the students when different teachers (substitutes, student teachers) had different rules for how to behave in their classroom. The students felt a sense of ownership and they resisted when another teacher with a more authoritarian style changed the rules and expectations. Often, the teacher would interpret their resistance as a challenge to authority and children were disciplined for, essentially, standing up for their rights.

Each time this happened, Robyn gathered the class at the meeting space and engaged children in dialogue, allowing them to express their frustrations and sense of injustice, and validating their right to question the hierarchical structure that created the inequities. Sean, a second-grader, explicitly referred to one substitute teacher's disciplinary style as "unjust." What was interesting was that the class as a whole would agree that the experience was unfair, rather than just those students who had been singled out for discipline.

There were also times when children subverted the rules, choosing to honor community and collaboration, as illustrated in the following vignette:

The second-grade students at The Village School were taking their first standardized reading comprehension test, a practice test aimed at preparing them for the high-stakes third grade ELA test the following year. The rules had been explained: there would be no helping and no collaboration. They opened their test booklets and began. Drew noticed that the girl across from him was not writing and seemed to be having trouble. He quietly pointed to the question and repeated it aloud to her, emphasizing the key words in the question that would help her to answer it correctly. She thought and then wrote her response. Across the room, Olivia had finished and handed in her test booklet. Willa, who was sitting across from her, finished writing a few minutes later and was about to hand in her test booklet. Olivia looked at Willa and quietly shook her head, "No." Willa turned to the front of the booklet. Again, Olivia shook her head "No" and pantomimed turning a page. Willa turned the pages and saw a final question that she had forgotten to answer on the last page of the booklet. Her eyes widened, and she proceeded to answer the question.

In both cases, Drew and Olivia knew that they were not following the test instructions. They were very quiet and surreptitious in their interventions, waiting until Robyn and Leslie were in another part of the room and would be unlikely to notice. Had I not been standing just there in both instances and observing, their actions might have gone completely unnoticed. They were deliberately subverting a rule with which they did not agree.

Neither Drew nor Olivia "cheated" by giving the other child the answer. They simply stepped in to lend a helping hand. They each made

a choice to help another student, despite the test instructions. For both Drew and Olivia, the obligation to help and take responsibility for others, to collaborate and share, was strongly ingrained in the culture of their classroom. They chose to honor this sense of citizenship, community and collaboration, rather than adhere to an imposed rule that did not make sense to them and that went against everything they had been taught up until this point.

A Final Word

As a society, we must recognize that democracy is not self-perpetuating; it must be nourished from generation to generation. Schools can either be a conservative force preserving the culture of power and the inequalities of the status quo or a medium for social change (Bourdieu, 1974; Delpit, 2006; Dewey, 1916). A society that supports the development of citizens educated in the affairs of state and prepared to participate at all levels of government must create schools that enact democratic values and practices for children at all grade levels, including the very youngest. As demonstrated over the school year in classrooms under the auspices of dedicated teachers, and administrators, even in an age of standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing, it is possible to achieve education for democracy, as envisioned by Dewey over one hundred years ago.

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Building Bridges: Making Literacy and Democracy Accessible in a Curriculum for Students with Interrupted Formal Education

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Abstract

The following is a qualitative exploratory investigation into the potential impact of a critical-thinking-based literacy curriculum for Students with Interrupted Education (SIFE) with Developing Literacy. This initial research sought out examples of the power- and citizenship-based themes of the curriculum as viewed through classroom observations and interviews with teachers, administrators, and students. Creating a curriculum for SIFE that allows these students to access critical thinking and higher-order themes, such as power, identity, and citizenship, not only provided these students with access to an education they otherwise would not receive, but also gave students access to the discussion around complex issues such as citizenship and immigration.

Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) are a heterogeneous group of English Language Learners (ELLs) who have been in the U.S. for less than twelve months and who, upon initial enrollment in school, are two or more years below grade level in literacy in their home language due to interrupted schooling prior to arrival in the United States. These students frequently need pedagogical supports, curricula, and supportive environments to help them to make up the large gaps in their education (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). SIFE with Developing Literacy (SDL) are those students who come to the United States at or below a second grade level in their home language; many are new to print. SIFE are an extremely at-risk population. According to one study, approximately 70% of these students will drop out without receiving their high school diploma (Fry, 2005).

Many SIFE have had several years' gap in their formal schooling due to their home country's limited attendance requirements, the need to work for their families, or some combination of political turmoil and refugee status (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). SIFE from Central America are frequently unaccompanied minors, meaning that they