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Abigail Brickman April 2, 2024

Democracy in the Classroom: Cultivating Citizenship through Curriculum

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the pivotal role of schooling in addressing democratic challenges by advocating for the integration of democratic principles into school curricula. Drawing upon interdisciplinary research in philosophy of education and political and social theory, this thesis examines the intricate relationship between education and democracy, arguing that an effective democracy relies on an informed and engaged citizenry cultivated through purposeful educational experiences. By critically analyzing these challenges, the thesis identifies the urgent need for transformative educational practices that prioritize democratic values, critical thinking, and civic participation. Through an exploration of key concepts in democratic theory and educational philosophy, including the nature of democracy, the purpose of schooling, and the role of educators, this thesis lays the theoretical groundwork for the development of a democratic curriculum. Building upon this theoretical foundation, the subsequent sections delve into practical considerations for implementing democratic education, including curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, and the cultivation of democratic school cultures. Central to the argument is the assertion that teaching democracy goes beyond the transmission of information; it involves fostering a culture of dialogue, empathy, and ethical reasoning that empowers students to become active agents of social change. By integrating democratic principles into every facet of the educational experience, from classroom discussions to community engagement projects, schools can serve as laboratories for democracy, nurturing the skills and dispositions necessary for democratic citizenship. The thesis concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of democratic education, including its potential to challenge entrenched power structures, foster inclusive communities, and reframe societal narratives around schooling and democracy. Through a critical examination of potential objections and alternative perspectives, this thesis seeks to contribute to ongoing debates in education policy and practice, advocating for a more equitable and participatory vision of education that aligns with the principles of democracy.

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Introduction

We live in a world that feels at the brink of collapse. There is war in the Middle East and in Ukraine, we are facing climate disaster after climate disaster, and there are gross rates of inequality. Internationally, citizens are electing undemocratic leaders, and democracy seems to be failing.[1] Nationally, democracy continues to recede. We have citizens and leaders who reject democratic election results, so much so that we faced insurrection at the Capitol. Further, elected officials–and appointed officials–nationwide are voting for policies that erode individual freedoms, such as access to abortion, gender affirming care, or recently, IVF treatment.

In the wake of this antidemocratic sentiment, one wonders: where are people getting this from? Why are we so polarized that some people are in favor of universal healthcare or abortion rights, whereas others are so opposed? Opinions are rooted in individual context; one's parents, zip code, church attended, or school they went to informs worldviews, so it follows that education must be at play here. The question we confront, then, is: is there something in our systems of education that is failing democracy?

When it comes to formal education, or schooling, we face this same pattern of anti-democratic feeling. States across the country, such as Florida and Texas, are banning books that predominantly grapple with race, LGBTQ+ identity, and mental health. These states push revisionist history curricula, object to teaching about the atrocities of slavery and Jim Crow, and create laws that deem critical race theory illegal to teach in school. In addition to undemocratic school policies, school systems face a massive opportunity gap in which students in wealthier zip codes have access to quality educational resources that provide the foundations for lifelong success, whereas students from poorer zip codes of predominantly persons of color lack these

[1] Freedom House. "Policy Recommendations." Accessed February 29, 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years/policy-recommendation.

opportunities, and face systemic barriers to success.[2] Due to historic redlining, segregation, and the unequal distribution of tax dollars, community schools in high income neighborhoods receive more funding, while schools in lower income neighborhoods receive much less in comparison.[3] As a result, alternative schooling movements, such as charter schools and school vouchers, are growing nationally, at times replacing the public school and failing to provide a community based, democratic education.

It appears, then, that we have an undemocratic school system, with undemocratic school policies. To make matters worse, we have a government that makes undemocratic policies, at times rejecting democracy in its entirety. If we want a democratic world, we must offer a democratic education, with democratic schools. And if we want a democratic education with democratic schools, we need a democratic world. In other words, failures in education lead to failure in democracy, and failures in democracy lead to failures in education, for if our schools do not nurture democratic citizens who work to achieve a democratic society, then our democratic society will falter, and in turn, so will the schools. Democracy and education rely on each other, so we must resolve both with the help of the other.

The way to do so, I argue, is by teaching democracy in our schools. The content and function of our curricula must forge democratic habits within students who will then work to make a more democratic world. In doing so, we will change how we understand what school is for, and thus rethink school policies and practices. Incorporating democracy into curriculum, simply put, will forge democracy both in and out of the classroom.

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[2] The Glossary of Education Reform. "Opportunity Gap Definition," May 15, 2013. https://www.edglossary.org/opportunity-gap/.
[3] Owens, Stephen. "Beyond Basic Education: Five Ways for Georgia to Fund Schools Fairly." *Georgia Budget and Policy Institute* (blog), December 11, 2018. https://gbpi.org/beyond-basic-education-five-ways-for-georgia-to-fund-schools-fairly/.

A democratic curriculum requires understanding democracy, so in Part I, I will ask: what is democracy, and what is involved in democracy? In Part II and III, I will ask why and how we begin to teach democracy. I argue that we must teach democracy. In Part IV I will discuss what this theory of teaching democracy can look like in practice. Lastly, in Part V, I will discuss what all of this means; what are we actually doing when we teach democracy, and why might this be a good thing? Over the course of my thesis, I will find that when we teach democracy we teach care and humanization such that we force a rewiring of our schooling narratives and school practices.

Part I: What is Democracy?

We consider, and historically have long considered, democracy to be the most virtuous form of government. It is a government in which each citizen uses their vote to participate in government. It is a government "by and for the people,"[4] where citizens are equal under the law, and have access to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[5] Yet, as early as ancient greek philosophers have opposed democracy. Plato, for example, sees the problem with democracy as a failure in education, and resolves this problem with rule by philosopher kings with the proper education and knowledge of "the good." An alternative solution to Plato's problem is to educate the population such that they become an informed citizenry. For the purpose of my thesis, I will take this alternative Deweyian view that all citizens can be educated for democracy. The purpose of my thesis is not to defend democracy in all its breadth, but rather to investigate what follows for schools if we assume this commitment to democracy and educating for democracy.

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[4] Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. "Gettysburg Address Delivered at Gettysburg Pa. Nov. 19th, 1863. [n. p. n. d.]." Online text. Accessed March 15, 2024. https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.24404500/?st=text.

[5] "U.S. Senate: Constitution of the United States." Accessed March 15, 2024. https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/senate-and-constitution/constitution.html

To educate citizens for democracy, we must first understand democracy. According to Dewey, a democracy exists when members of the group share and act upon the values of the larger group as a whole, and the larger group as a whole involves the individual, ensuring participation in transforming institutional structures to better uphold these shared values. In other words, democracy exists when each person has a say, and the group values that say, as well as actively works to achieve those shared values. Democracy, then, relies on the principles of community, growth, and pluralism. Democracy necessitates community in that it depends on the good of the group; we cannot have democracy without community, and acting in favor of the values of the community. Democracy both facilitates and is built upon growth, for its success depends on its ability to adapt to change; democracy thrives when it systematically ensures that decisions, actions, and structures transform as values, contexts, and individuals transform. Lastly, democracy requires pluralism–the idea that individuals in a society must acknowledge and interact with those in different groups or spaces in order to better understand one's environment–in that it necessitates accounting for the experience of others and an understanding of the world array of human experience. Democracy, in holding the values of community, growth, and pluralism as foundational, is not simply a form of government, but a way of life:

> It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking own of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the fully import of their activity.[6]

[6] John, Dewey. *Democracy and Education*. 1916. Reprint, Toronto, Ontario: The Macmillan Company, 1944, 87.

Democracy, in that it informs individual action based on the actions, needs, and values of those around it, is a type of habit. Dewey defines a habit as "A form of executive skill, of efficiency in doing. A habit means an ability to use natural conditions as means to ends. It is an active control of the environment through control of the organs of action. We are perhaps apt to emphasize the control of the body at the expense of control of the environment."[7] A habit, in other words, is a consistent action, desire, feeling, or thought in response to external stimulus. For example, in consistently ringing a bell upon feeding his dog, Pavlov created within his dog the habit of salivating upon hearing the bell ring. Humans, in a similar way, form habits based on interaction with an external environment. As a child, for example, we learn to put on a coat when it is cold out. Just as we form habits of action, we form habits of growth, adaptation, and change.

A democratic habit takes society as the larger external environment through which we affect change. A democratic habit is one that considers the interest of others in conversation with one's own actions, thoughts, and motivations. It understands how one's self fits into the larger community, and how the larger community transforms the self, and acts accordingly to support one's community and oneself. It involves "not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control" as well as "continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse."[8] A democratic habit considers pluralistic experience and shared values, and subsequently makes decisions, transformations, and adjustments accordingly.

Part II: Why Teach Democracy?

Democratic habits must be taught, just as habits of brushing one's teeth morning and night, or multiplying before adding must be taught. As Dewey writes:

[7] Dewey, 46.
[8] Dewey, 86-87.

> A society which is mobile, which is full of channels for the distribution of a change occurring anywhere, must see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability. Otherwise, they will be overwhelmed by the changes in which they are caught and whose significance or connections they do not perceive. The result will be a confusion in which a few will appropriate to themselves the results of the blind and externally directed activities of others.[9]

In a complex and ever-changing society, individuals that fail to consider their own actions within the larger group will lose sight of their personal needs and motivations, and in turn, society will fail to consider them as individuals. A democratic society that holds and teaches democratic habits, on the other hand, fosters environments in which individuals consider their own actions alongside the good of the community, as well as works to transform the community given group consensus and the pluralistic nature of experience. When we formally educate for democracy, we foster democratic habits that ensure each student is prepared to flourish in a democratic world.

Given that democracy is a way of life, or a habit, that requires teaching, it must be taught in school. The school, according to Dewey, is the place of formal education. Education, in its broadest sense, means "bringing up." This can happen anywhere. We can be "brought up" at home, religious spaces, on sports teams, or through movies. The school, though, is where this bringing up is structured. Dewey writes, "as soon as community depends to any considerable extent upon what lies beyond its own territory and its own immediate generation, it must rely upon the set agency of schools to ensure adequate transmission of all its resources."[10] When a physical community is so complex and structured such that its success and continuity depends on

[9] Dewey, 88.
[10] Dewey, 19.

myriad and interdependent resources beyond its physical realm, schools must exist to transfer the structures, resources, and values onto the new generations. Dewey further argues that school is able to do this in three ways: it breaks up these resources into digestible bits of information; it lets go of the unnecessary resources or information; and provides an environment where students can learn beyond the context in which they were born. In this way, school provides the foundations for individual growth.

Growth is the formation of habits. School, in that it provides a formal environment for growth, plays a critical role in forming habits, particularly these habits of thought. Growth involves learning about the world in which we live and learning how to behave in that world. We cannot grow without engaging with diverse people, environments, and ideas, for if everything we interact with remains the same, we would never form new habits. Democracy, then, given that it is a set of habits of engaging with the world, should be taught in schools, for schools support the formal accumulation of habits.

If democracy were taught informally, outside the school, we could not ensure that all students would have access to an environment in which they could learn beyond their individual contexts. The values they encounter would solely be the values they find in the home, in a religious space, or on a sports team, rather than formally learning about other experiences and values that may inform one's own. For example, in my elementary school, from second through fifth grade, each class went to peace class twice a week. In peace class, we would practice mindfulness, learn about empathy and kindness, and practice conflict resolution skills. Each week we would get a kindness pal who we had to practice kindness with that week. I made fun of peace class growing up; why do I need to practice kindness and conflict resolution if I already knew how to do it? I already knew the platinum rule–treat others how they want to be treated–so

why were we spending time in school doing these things? While I grew up in a household that valued caring for others and parents who ensured I knew how to share and compromise with my sisters, perhaps I had unkind classmates, or classmates who were only children, who did not know about the platinum rule nor how to compromise. Teaching these values in school ensured that each student learned these shared community values such that as we grew up, we were each able to apply them to our daily lives. I share this example because I think we need to teach democracy in school for this reason: to ensure that students learn democratic habits and values in order to apply them later in life as they become democratic citizens. Without a formal democratic education, we would not be able to ensure that democratic habits are properly transferred through and between communities. Thus, if we want a democratic society, then we must teach it and inhabit it in our school systems.

Part III: How Do We Teach Democracy?

To achieve a democratic society with equitable and democratic schools, schools must forge democratic habits within their students. To do so, both the structure of our schools and the habits they teach must be democratic. Schools must be both public and teach democratic curricula.

Public schooling is at the heart of democracy, for if we want a government by and for the people, the people should be educated. Since the beginning of the American experiment, access to public school has reflected who is considered a citizen. Thomas Jefferson, in fact, proposed a system of public schooling in Virginia, for he believed that self-government required an educated populace in order to succeed.[11] As James Carpenter writes in "Jefferson and the Role of

[11] Monticello. "Jefferson and the Role of Education in Citizenship." Accessed December 23, 2023. https://www.monticello.org/the-art-of-citizenship/the-role-of-education/#:~:text=Thomas%20Jefferson%20believed%20only%20educated,partially%20achieved%20his%20larger%20goals.

Education in Citizenship," "To ensure that the people were the best safeguard against an overzealous government, Jefferson's political vision required an informed citizenry. Citizenship, therefore, was no nebulous concept for Jefferson. It was integrally linked to power, responsibility, and freedom. It was axiomatic for Jefferson to connect freedom and responsibility, with republican citizenship."[12] While Jefferson only considered white men to be citizens in the newly formed United States, his notion of citizenship was a powerful one. He expected citizens to make informed choices regarding their local and federal governments; he expected them to exercise their rights, engage in contracts, run businesses, and make morally responsible decisions. Practicing these habits of citizenship, according to Jefferson, required formal schooling.

Access to school and definitions of citizenship have long been connected, and the expansion, or lack of expansion, of both were often cites of political and legal battles. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court decided that segregation was unconstitutional according to the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. At the crux of their opinion is the idea that separate schools inhibit equal access to American citizenship:

> Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these

[12] Carpenter, James. "Thomas Jefferson and the Ideology of Democratic Schooling." *Democracy & Education* 21, no. 2 (2013): 1–11.

> days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.[13]

As the majority opinion reads, school provides the foundations and fruits of American citizenship such that if schools are separate, they unequally distribute these opportunities. Thus, segregation is unconstitutional. *Brown v. Board of Education* supports the notion of schooling as crucial to our conception of American citizenship; when one has access to public school, as is their right, they have access to the benefits and privileges of American citizenship.

As *Brown v. Board of Education* alludes, a prerequisite for democratic schools is that these schools are public. Diane Ravitch writes that "public education is a vital institution in our democratic society, and its governance must be democratic, open to public discussion and public participation."[14] In other words, by public school, we mean schools that are not only open to all students living within the defined physical area, but schools in which the curriculum and operation is subject to the input of those attending the school. Public school, as Neil Postman says, "creates a public."[15] Public schooling creates shared narratives that in turn create shared values and habits of viewing the world; public school helps create a connected community. When we work towards schools that reflect democratic values, then, central to this idea are public schools that are public in terms of accessibility to all students, open to public input, and as reflecting the shared democratic values of the community.

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[13] National Archives. "Brown v. Board of Education (1954)," September 29, 2021. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/brown-v-board-of-education.
[14] Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. Revised and Expanded edition. New York: Basic Books, 2016, 97.
[15] Postman, Neil. *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995.

In response to my argument for public schooling, one may argue that we already have public schools, and while the United States has public schools–it has many phenomenal public schools–public schools are not created equal. In many cities in the country, families are opting out of public schools, choosing to send their kids to charter schools or using state-sponsored vouchers to attend private schools. The idea of choice prevailed much of the education policy in the 1990s and 2000s, for policymakers on the left and right believed that if schools were subject to free market values, then schools everywhere would improve. Choice, combined with accountability through rigorous testing, subjected the public school system to individual pursuits of wealth as opposed to providing for the needs of the community. As charters and vouchers grew in popularity, public schools began to lose students, lose resources, and at times even shut down. Today, we face a problem where some public schools in the country receive ample resources and students flourish as a result of its location in a wealthy zip code, whereas others receive so few resources that parents are pushed to consider other schooling options, such as charters or vouchers. Due to rigorous testing standards, curriculum in lower income zip codes is less democratic; it is tailored to the test in order to ensure funding, whereas high income zip codes, with more resources, have the ability to support a democratic curriculum. While we have public schools in virtually every county in the country, the problem is that the system is undemocratic; it privileges wealthier neighborhoods, and forces families in poorer neighborhoods to opt for other school options, thus contributing to the underinvestment in the neighborhood public school and creating an even larger deficit in democratic curricula. The public school system in the United States creates an opportunity gap in which individuals of higher socioeconomic status have access to high quality schooling and democratic curricula, whereas individuals of lower socioeconomic status do not have those same opportunities granted.

This lack of educational opportunity and democratic curricula for certain groups and the privileging of others is inherently undemocratic.

While ensuring schools are public is a crucial element in creating schools that forge and promote democratic values and habits, it is equally important to establish and teach democratic curricula. Curriculum constitutes what we teach in school and how we teach it. A high school English curriculum, for example, might teach rhetorical devices through analysis of Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" or Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience". Philosophy of education has long asked, and continues to ask, what curriculum should look like. What habits should curriculum form and how? Where Plato argues for children to be educated in habits relating to their social class, Rousseau argues for a natural education in which students develop habits of engaging with their physical environment before anything else. Alfred Whitehead argues for three separate stages of an education: romance, precision, and generalization.[16] When it comes to a school that reflects democratic values, the school itself must teach a democratic curriculum, for the curriculum details the habits a school will instill. Just as an English curriculum teaches habits of close reading, writing, and analyzing, a democratic curriculum would teach democratic habits.

As I established, democracy is a habit of considering one's own actions in relation to the good of the group that is predicated on community, growth, and pluralism. Given that democracy is a habit of engaging with the world and a set of values that inform those habits, then teaching democracy means facilitating those habits and values within students such that each student becomes a democratic citizen with their own worldview and individual goals, who work to

[16] Desmet, Ronald, and Andrew David Irvine. "Alfred North Whitehead." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Winter 2022. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/whitehead/.

achieve a more democratic world as they become fuller versions of oneself. Teaching democracy, then, means teaching the prerequisites of community, growth, and pluralism and teaching what it means to be a citizen, with the goal of ensuring students grow into citizens who care about the world and want to make it a better place. This requires teaching democratically; a democratic teacher must engage with students in dialogue about the issues they see as pressing such that they better understand the world around them in order to transform it.

Incorporating democracy into the curriculum ensures equity because it guarantees that students receive the same democratic education in school such that each student is given the foundations to prosper. Democratic curriculum, in other words, formalizes democratic education. It establishes the specific democratic values and components students must learn, discuss, grapple with, and practice so that in the future, students will be able to apply their democratic skills and act democratically as they move through the world.

Curriculum is a major topic of discussion and controversy today. Questions regarding what to teach and how to teach it are ever-present and polarizing. And it is for good reason: what we learn in school shapes students and the world they will affect. It is necessary, then, to come to a consensus on the people we want to cultivate. This is not to say that each student needs to be the same type of person–that's eerily dystopian–but to say that if we want democratic citizens, whatever individual democratic citizen they may be, then we must ensure that students learn democracy and learn citizenship. And in practice, this happens in the classroom, through the curriculum.

How is a democratic curriculum any different from what we have now? While there exist curricula that forge democratic habits in students, there exist curricula that fail to do so, and even curricula that forge undemocratic habits. For example, school systems across the country are

banning books, teaching revisionist history, and failing to acknowledge important historical trends or events. For example, in 2022 Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis signed the "Don't Say Gay" bill into law. The law prohibits instruction on gender or sexual identity, restricts pronouns to sex assigned at birth, and allows parents to restrict their child's access to certain books, expediting the book banning process.[17] While much of the law was overturned recently, classroom lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity are still prohibited.[18] These curricular restrictions reject the experiences of certain groups and only consider the history of those who make up the majority, hold more wealth, or are privileged in other ways, such as race or nationality. While a curriculum of this sort is explicitly undemocratic, certain curricula, in failing to engage with community issues fail to reflect democratic values. For example, a curriculum that caters solely to state-wide tests or national standards does not reflect democratic values, for it does not consider pluralistic student experience nor community contexts. Simply put, while many curricula are democratic, at least in some part, a curriculum is undemocratic if it both fails to create informed citizens who act democratically and fails to include real-world and community applications, pluralistic human experience, and is tailored to students, then it does not reflect democratic values.

If we want public schooling to create informed citizens who participate in democracy, value democracy, and hold democratic habits, then curriculum itself must be anchored in

[17] "What You Need to Know about Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' and 'Don't Say They' Laws, Book Bans, and Other Curricula Restrictions." National Education Association, n.d. https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/30424-know-your-rights_web_v4.pdf.

[18] Prieur, Danielle. "Court Overturns Large Part of Florida's so-Called 'don't Say Gay' Law." *NPR*, March 12, 2024, sec. Law. https://www.npr.org/2024/03/12/1238113992/court-overturns-large-part-of-floridas-so-called-dont-say-gay-law.

democratic community values. In practice, doing so requires centering student experience of the world, and pushing students not only to understand, but to transform their community.

When a curriculum centers student experience of the world, it is both pluralistic and applicable to real world problems. It appeals to the different modes and identities through which students understand the world, as well as tailors the curriculum to reflect the experiences that students themselves face. As Alfred Whitehead articulates, "Theoretical ideals should always find important applications within the pupil's curriculum. This is not an easy doctrine to apply, but a very hard one. It contains within itself the problem of keeping knowledge alive, of preventing it from becoming inert, which is the central problem of all education."[19] Whitehead's educational ideal is in itself democratic in that it considers the various modes and lenses through which theory can be applied in practice. A democratic curriculum, then, in teaching practical applications, acknowledges and makes use of pluralistic experience and community values. It is important to note that teaching practical applications is not as simple as teaching what is relevant at any given moment or in any given place. It involves taking a certain relevance and leading them to other relevances, that are, in turn, relevant to a larger aspect of life itself. For example, in an election year, voting and election operations might be immediately relevant. And yet, it is not enough to discuss how this specific election will work or the particular candidates involved, but also important to discuss how voting works, why we vote in the way that we do, and the shortcomings of the methods we use in conducting elections. The relevance of the election, in this way, would lead to other relevances such as the electoral college, federal versus state regulations, or the role of the Supreme Court, both according to the Constitution or in past elections. Real-world applications, in this way, must not be restricted to immediacy, but must

[19] Whitehead, Alfred North. *The Aims of Education: And Others Essays*. New York Toronto Oxford: Free press, 1967, 6.

take the theoretical a step further such that the student understands the world around them better than they did before.

A democratic curriculum not only considers pluralistic student experience of the world, but it takes that individual and community experience to inform curriculum itself. As Whitehead says, "Each school must have the claim to be considered in relation to its special circumstances. The classifying of schools for some purposes is necessary. But no absolutely rigid curriculum, not modified by its own staff, should be permissible."[20] If a school fails to consider the needs of the people involved, it is undemocratic; if the curriculum fails to align with the values of those that it serves, it fails to to be a democratic curriculum. In this way, then, a democratic curriculum not only values practical applications and pluralistic experiences of the world, but it uses those experiences, in turn, to inform the curriculum.

Finally, a democratic curriculum builds the foundation for transformation of the world into a better one. Paulo Friere, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, captures this idea in his dialogical and problem posing method of teaching. Problem posing education involves a dialogue between the teacher and the student: it involves a "constant unveiling of reality" in which "students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge."[21] Problem-posing education, as Friere conceptualizes it, enables conscientização: it pushes students to "perceive critically" the world in which they live, interact with it, and subsequently take action against the oppressive elements of their worlds. Friere's problem-posing education is active in that it constantly learns and unlearns reality such that transformation of an oppressive world takes place, both in the form of the oppressed's worldview as well as in the physical

[20] Whitehead, 14.
[21] Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Tenth printing. A Continuum Book. New York: The Seabury Press, 1974, 68.

environment in which they live. Friere's pedagogy is a democratic one, for it considers the pluralistic experience of those involved in the learning and creates a moving consensus through dialogue: "the starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people."[22] A dialogical, problem-posing curriculum as Freire conceptualizes does not simply support any transformation of the world, but rather an intelligent transformation that brings institutions and structures closer to their commitments to democracy; it ensures that the world around us is reflective of the democratic values of community and growth.

A democratic curriculum is not only democratic in content, but in structure and function. In teaching democratic habits, it teaches building and adapting community consensus. It takes the needs of the students and the community as a starting point in both crafting curriculum and teaching democratic habits. In this way, if a community prioritizes a certain cultural norm or value, then the curriculum can teach and incorporate that value. If a community values a bad norm, though, such as racism, then teaching that norm does not mean instilling racism into the community and maintaining the status quo, but rather using the democratic problem-posing method that questions norms, and transforms communities to make them more free, just, and equitable. Democracy, in valuing the good of the group as well as the individual, and in being a set of habits of engaging with the world necessitates a varying application of it within school communities. Through a democratic curriculum, students are encouraged to examine and interrogate conceptions of democracy in their own communities and in larger American life, such that they develop an understanding of the complexities and nuances of democracy, as well as the skills needed for active citizenship in a diverse and dynamic society. A democratic curriculum

[22] Freire, 85.

gives students the foundations through which they can grow into individual citizens who act and think democratically; citizens who actively engage with the people and the world around them.

A democratic curriculum, then, is one that tailors the curriculum to student experience, pushing them to both understand and transform the world around them. It is a curriculum that is built democratically, reflects democratic values, and works towards an even more democratic future. It is a curriculum that forges habits and methods of engaging with the world such that each student is prepared to be an active citizen of their community, who constantly work to achieve democracy.

Part IV: What Does A Democratic Curriculum Look Like?

It would be hypocritical of me to suggest a democratic curriculum in theory and fail to include real-world applications of this theory. While a democratic curriculum can be adapted and taught in myriad ways depending on community or individual contexts, I will provide a few examples, based on the components discussed earlier: built democratically, based in real-world experience, and enables community transformation.

Democratic in Structure: Free Schools

A prime example of a democratic curriculum, within a democratically structured institution, is Free Schools. Free Schools in the United States grew in popularity in the sixties--an era of counter-culture, liberation, and political change--and they exemplified these overwhelming societal movements.[23] Free Schools in the United States were founded based on the ideals of A.S. Neill's boarding school in Leiston, England called Summerhill. Summerhill held many "alternative" values and policies, such as a belief in "the goodness of the child," the aim of education as happiness, and an approach to schooling that centered the child first and

[23] "THE FREE SCHOOL MOVEMENT - ProQuest." Accessed January 25, 2024. https://www.proquest.com/docview/302667665/citation.

lacked formal discipline. While it is up for debate whether all of the Summerhill policies, values, and ideals "work," Summerhill is a valuable example of how curriculum and school institutions can forge and reflect democratic values.

Specifically, Summerhill forged democratic habits within its students by way of its general school meetings. General school meetings, held every Saturday night, covered school topics varying from social life, disagreements between or within groups, and disciplinary action for individual or group offenses. Every student and child holds exactly one vote, and the chairman of each meeting is appointed by the previous chairman. In *Summerhill*: *A Radical Approach to Child Rearing,* Neill highlights some of the important rules and agreements made at general school meetings, such as requiring a lifeguard when swimming, or agreement upon fines for going to bed after bedtime, or consensus on punishment for bullies. While Neill acknowledges that self-government works best when there is a mixture of older and younger students, as children hold differing values based on their ages, he writes:

> I cannot see an alternative method to our Summerhill. It may be a fairer democracy than the political one, for children are pretty charitable to each other, and have no vested interests to speak of. Moreover, it is a more genuine democracy because laws are made at an open meeting, and the question of uncontrollable elected delegates does not arise…Summerhill, by getting away from the outward nothings of life, can have and does have a community spirit that is in advance of its time.[24]

While the general body meetings are not an explicit element of the Summerhill teaching curriculum, the meetings create a formal place in which students can engage with their community democratically. The general body meetings, in other words, are a part of the

[24] Neill, Alexander Sutherland. *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*. New York: Hart Publishing Co. , 1960, 55.

Summerhill curriculum in that they formally forge democratic habits within the students. Summerhill creates an environment where students and teachers have a say regarding school values and operations, and the school changes and adapts to the values of the students and teachers as a whole. In this way, students make decisions based on both individual motivations and the good of the school, and thus learn democratic habits of engaging with their community. Summerhill ensures that students (and teachers) collectively understand and utilize democratic values of community and growth. Through these meetings, students create a moving consensus that takes into consideration the experience of various students and teachers alike and is based on shared Summerhill values. The Summerhill community makes decisions built upon shared democratic values, and grows as students grow. Simply put, Summerhill's general body meeting forges democracy within students through the simple practice of voting on school issues. It teaches students habits of community engagement, participation, and civil discourse that can be applied outside the school, even though, as Neill argues, politics may get in the way.

Summerhill, as much as it forged democratic habits in students and in teachers, faced backlash, specifically in its inaccessibility to poorer families and impracticality of policies such as allowing students to skip class as they choose or teaching students to read only if they wish to do so. Jonathan Kozol, for example, denounced the isolated free school that "is often tied in with a commune or with what is described as an "intentional community."[25] He argues, rather, that Free Schools must be within cities, engaging with the issues that marginalized communities face: "we have an obligation to stay here and fight these battles and work out these problems in the cities where there is the greatest need and where, moreover, we cannot so easily be led into a mood of falsified euphoria."[26] Kozol's conception of free schools that spread nationwide, built

[25] Kozol, Jonathan. *Free Schools*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972, 7.

[26] Kozol, 9.

upon many of the values of Summerhill while adhering to real-life needs of the communities he engaged with. Kozol's free school has six components: 1) outside the bureaucracy of public school 2) outside the white man's notion of counter-culture 3) inside cities 4) in direct contact with marginalized communities 5) "centralized" and "localized" 6) as little known as possible, to ensure smaller school community. While the curriculum of these schools varied, how Kozol's Free Schools were built and operated forged democratic values.

Kozol, in *Free Schools* asked an important question of Free Schools:

> How can Free School achieve, at one and the same time, a sane, on-going down-to-earth, skill-oriented, sequential, credentializing and credentialized curricular experience directly geared in to the real survival needs of colonies children in a competitive and technological society; and simultaneously evolve, maintain, nourish and revivify the "uncredentialized," "un-authorized," "un-sanctioned," "non-curricular" consciousness of pain, rage, love and revolution which first infused their school with truth and magic, exhilaration and comradeship.[27]

While Kozol does not answer the question in full, for each free school is different based on community contexts and individual needs, he argues that they must be oriented towards "the liberation, to the vision, and to the potency of the oppressed."[28] Free Schools, then, must simultaneously be child-centered," open-structured," "individualized," "unoppressive," while catering to the real-life "survival" needs of the families and students who attend the school. Kozol's free school takes the democratic and child-centered values of Summerhill and places them in a community that desires liberation and transformation through education. Kozol's Free school, in tailoring the structure and curriculum of the school to community needs, similarly

[27] Kozol, 49.
[28] Kozol, 50.

promotes democratic values of community and growth. In centering the school within the urban community, allowing for the school to be a center of community and family life, Kozol's free school reflects the values of the neighborhood it inhabits. Further, as it balances a child-centered and pragmatic curriculum, it works primarily towards "liberation" and transformation, informed by the moving consensus of the community and the power of individuals. Kozol's Free School, then, is democratic in the same way Freire is democratic: it takes the experience of those being taught as the starting point, and uses that experience to inform both the teaching and structure of the school.

Free Schools, both in Neill and Kozol's conception of them, forge democratic habits through curriculum and structure of the school. Where Neill uses general school meetings to forge habits of community engagement, active citizenship, and pluralism, Kozol uses the physicality of the school itself to inform what is taught and how it is taught, in order to transform the community for the better. Students at free schools often vote on the subject matter they want to learn next, so the curriculum itself, as well as the social components of the school, is structured democratically. Neill and Kozol, in building a school life democratically–that is, in building curriculum, physical spaces, and social environments democratically–are able to reflect democratic habits, both in school operations as well as in the curriculum itself.

Democratic Knowledge

Free Schools are not without their critics. E.D. Hirsch, for example, rejects the free, child-centered schooling in favor of shared knowledge schooling. He argues that when it comes to educating for democracy, it is not about how we teach, but what we teach. It is not enough to structure schools democratically, as free schools do, but we must actively teach the values of democracy within the core curriculum. Hirsch proposes shared knowledge schools as a method

of instilling democratic habits in students, and creating a democratic community. Shared knowledge, though, should not stand in opposition to child-centered schooling. Just as democracy requires community, it also requires the individual. In child-centered schooling, students are given the resources to grow into themselves. Knowing oneself, and nurturing students to better know oneself, is key in developing democratic citizens, for how can one make actions in relation to the good of the community if one does not know what actions they want to take nor has a conception of how their actions affect others? Child-centered schooling, in cultivating individual flourishing, is just as important as shared-language schools that teach democratic habits through shared language, values, and knowledge.

Shared knowledge schooling, as Hirsch conceptualizes it, takes many of its ideas from Noah Webster, known as the "Father of American Scholarship and Education." Webster argued that "Education of youth is, in all governments, an object of the first consequence. The impression received in early life, usually form the characters of individuals; a union of which forms the general character of nation."[29] In other words, school is paramount in creating a democratic community where each citizen holds democratic habits. Further, he argued that "the new nation could work effectively only if its language and ideals and loyalties were commonly shared throughout the land."[30] Webster, along with other early educators such as Horace Mann and Caleb Bingham understood that common schools that taught common values, language, and knowledge were essential to creating a democratic community. Hirsch argues that Webster's emphasis on shared values and knowledge resulted in higher test scores, whereas the new child-centered way of learning has led to a drastic decline. While this debate is not the topic of

[29] Hirsch, E. D. *How to Educate a Citizen: The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation*. First edition. New York, NY: Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2020, 9.
[30] Ibid.

my thesis, Hirsch emphasizes that what worked in Webster's conception of schooling was the emphasis of shared language and shared values:

> It's commonly shared, often unspoken background knowledge and values that ultimately enable citizens to understand one another and function effectively. The essence of nationality and ethnicity is what researchers have named a "speech community." It is a group of people who share the same meanings in their "social communication" because they share the same unspoken implications, and the same background knowledge.[31]

Shared language establishes meaningful communication. Meaningful communication creates community. Community allows for democracy. Teaching democratic habits, then, does not simply involve teaching how to vote or how to lobby, but it involves explicitly teaching the language and values of democracy; it involves teaching shared knowledge from which we can build community, and thus democracy. If we incorporate shared knowledge into the curriculum--if we teach central values, knowledge, and language of democracy--we can forge democratic habits within democratic citizens, who can strengthen democratic communities.

Hirsch argues that this shared language and set of values must be taught to children; pre-existing knowledge and values inherent within a culture must be instilled into students through curriculum.[32] The idea of instilling pre-determined cultural values is at odds with Dewey, who argues that shared values and language should be deciphered from the good of the community, rather than placed on them. I do think, though, that these two educational philosophies can be bridged. Cultural values must originate from somewhere; individuals in the

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[31] Hirsch, 28-29.
[32] Darmawati.R, Mustofa Aji Prayitno, Moh. Solehuddin, Baso Intang Sappaile, and Didik Cahyono. "A Comparison of John Dewey and E. D. Hirsch's Thoughts on Determining Quality Educational Goals." *COMPETITIVE: Journal of Education* 2, no. 3 (July 17, 2023): 156–68. https://doi.org/10.58355/competitive.v2i3.35.

community must have had a consensus on a set of values at some point for them to be culturally relevant. A shared knowledge curriculum would teach this set of values to promote cultural literacy in students. The shared-knowledge curriculum, then, does not simply instill values unrelated to the values of the community, but forges a set of democratic values that are culturally relevant to the specific society. That is not to say, though, that this curriculum cannot be amended or adapted based on specific community contexts. If a school community within the nation were to value arts and music, for example, then a curriculum that engages with and practices those central concepts can be incorporated into the curriculum.

Hirsch argues that in practice, shared knowledge schools should have "common grade by grade content." Hirsch, in his conception of shared knowledge schools, argues that rather than child centered learning, schools should have common grade by grade content. In this way, every child within a certain grade will learn about specific topics: "No child is left with gaping holes in his or her knowledge. And this common knowledge becomes the enabling foundation for further shared knowledge in the following month or grade level."[33] Hirsch's idea of a shared knowledge school does not enforce a rigid timeline nor pushes certain views upon students. It simply gives each student the same tools in the toolbox such that, in the future, citizens can use their tools to communicate effectively with each other and build a better future. As Hirsch says, "democracy and equality demand a rich public sphere where people are able to communicate effectively with one another."[34] Shared knowledge, in this way, allows for consensus building, pluralism, community, and growth.

Hirsch cites the Singaporean curriculum as a prime example of a working shared knowledge curriculum. Rather than teaching a separate civics education course that teaches

[33] Hirsch, 61.
[34] Hirsch, 76.

democratic habits, the Singaporean curriculum incorporates democracy and citizenship into core subjects of Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies. Language arts, in fact, is called "character and citizenship education."[35] The Language Arts curriculum understands "language proficiency is a social art inherently connected to society. It holds a given society together, and it is intimately connected to what Durkheim called moralité, which can very accurately be translated as 'character and citizenship education.'"[36] Language Arts is not as simple as reading comprehension and critical analysis, but rather known as a mastery of language skills for use in society. Social Studies, similarly seeks to teach Singaporean values such as empathy and teaches students about the world in which they live in order to "'appreciate the complexities of the human experience.'"[37] Thus, social studies is not simply history, but lessons regarding how to interact with the world in a thoughtful way given important historical and individual contexts. Lastly, the science curriculum, rather than compartmentalizing the topics into biology and physics and chemistry, instead links the branches together, enabling students to think relationally and pluralistically about the physical world.

Singapore's curriculum teaches democracy in that it teaches students how to interact with the world actively and thoughtfully. It teaches students to be pluralistic and pushes students to change the world for the better. It does so through core subjects of language arts, science, and social studies as opposed to an entirely separate civics education. Within a shared knowledge curriculum, educators would not be teaching civics as a stand-alone course, but would bring the language of citizenship into the content, thus instilling within students a shared language of citizenship and forging democratic habits.

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[35] Hirsch, 162.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Hirsch, 163.

Student Experience of the World

It is not enough, though, to simply use democratic language and values within the subjects of language arts, social studies, and science. Language and values alone cannot bridge the gap between understanding what it means to be a citizen in theory and acting as a citizen in practice. Thus, knowledge based schooling must be coupled with real world practice through case-method and problem-based learning.

Case method learning takes the concepts one learns in class and applies them to a specific scenario or situation; it is a way of applying and practicing the theory and themes we learn in school. “focuses people on a common situation--one full of specific, interconnected issues. The case, a slice of life, represents not an idealized situation, but a representation of the way life is. Typically, a case story line or sequence of events carries readers from beginning to end. Characters enter at various points and interact to evince a set of issues, dilemmas, and opportunities…Complexity permits multiple levels of analysis on sometimes competing but always realistic problems."[38] Cases, in other words, give the theoretical content of a subject or topic a real-world example in which students can practice skills, better understand complexities of the content, and problem solve. Cases are not new; law schools and medical schools have been using cases to teach future lawyers and future doctors for over one hundred years, but they have yet to be utilized properly in primary and secondary schooling. Cases, in providing students a real world application of knowledge and skills, are democratic; they allow for pluralistic understandings of reality, pursue a version of Freire’s problem posing education in that they cater to student experience and push students to both understand and solve problems, and ground learning in community values. They align with Dewey’s method of educative experience, which

[38] McNergney, Robert F., Edward R. Ducharme, and Mary K. Ducharme, eds. *Educating for Democracy: Case-Method Teaching and Learning*. Mahwah, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1999, 7.

requires 1) an activity the child is interested in 2) a problem that stimulates a curiosity 3) the student has the information and capabilities to grapple with the problem developed 4) the student must create their own solutions to the problem, and 5) the student can practice and apply the solution. In drawing from real-life experience, they teach students how to build consensus, problem solve, and become effective community members.

There are five steps to case-method teaching: 1) issues and facts 2) perspectives and values 3) professional knowledge 4) formulating actions 5) considering consequences. Each aspect of case-method teaching forges a certain democratic in students. In the issues and facts step, students themselves decide what issues or ideas are the most pressing within a given case. In this way, students learn to practice consensus building within their groups, as well as suggest to students that their participation and involvement matters. This first step aligns with Freire's problem posing education: it begins learning with the students themselves, such that they are able to learn about the factors and problems that make up their experience, and work to resolve them. Personal action within a group and building shared group values is central to this first step, and central to democracy. The second step to case method teaching–perspective and values–pushes students to place themselves in other positions within the case to gain a fuller picture of the case. For example, in a case about health insurance, insurance companies, young people, old people, and the government will each hold different values and perspectives. Teaching students to practice empathy and incorporate different perspectives teaches students pluralism, which, as we have discussed, is an important component of democracy. The professional knowledge step of case-method teaching allows students to apply the knowledge learned in class. For example, in a health insurance case, students would be able to apply math or economics knowledge, as well as knowledge from history or science. In this way, case method

teaching allows for the application of various disciplines through one case. Further, involvement is known to be linked with higher learning, so in involving students deeply and meaningfully in the case and the content, schools are likely to see better learning outcomes. Involvement peaks within step four: formulating actions. In this step, students propose best courses of actions in relation to the problems they posed. It is the second component to Freire's pedagogy: transformation. When students learn to solve problems and take action in school, they are likely to do so as democratic citizens. Problem solving through case-method teaching forges the democratic habits of community engagement and participation. Lastly, case-method teaching concludes with a consideration of consequences of actions. This step, while a reflective element of the case-method teaching, is important in terms of teaching both pluralism and growth. In reflecting on the process and actions taken, students develop habits of empathy and growth; they learn that complex problems have complex solutions, that certain actions may be beneficial in the short term and not in the long term, or vice versa, or they learn that other people might disagree with them on best practices in resolving certain issues. Over the course of the five steps of case-method teaching, students develop important democratic habits of pluralism, problem-solving, community engagement, and growth. It suggests to students that the things they learn are not just important in theory, but have real-world applications that can help them change the world for the better.

Dewey's laboratory schools provide an example of a school that realizes this problem-based, case-method learning. Dewey's first laboratory school, the University of Chicago Laboratory School, takes problem solving as a fundamental component of the curriculum and views questioning as a core tenet of the educational experience.[39] Dewey understood that

[39] "Mission & Strategic Framework - University of Chicago Laboratory Schools." Accessed March 15, 2024. https://www.ucls.uchicago.edu/about-lab/mission-strategic-framework.

students learn better when they are interested in the content they learn, and that it is the job of the school to create conscientious citizens. His lab schools, then, encourage students to try activities they are excited about, and much of the curriculum surrounds problem-solving. Additionally, the schools themselves are their own social community, where each student plays a role. The schools teach democratic habits of "practice in working out problems, accepting responsibility, meeting new situations, cooperating with others, and engaging in real and practical work," and give students the space to practice these habits in school.[40] Dewey's lab schools, in centering problem solving, practicing democratic habits, and in building curriculum based on student experience of the world are a prime example of democratic schooling that prepares students to be active citizens of the world.

Transformation through Service Learning

While cases instill democratic habits through teaching real-world applications, students must still practice real world applications. In other words, they must take the knowledge from the classroom, whether theoretical or case-based, and use it to make the world a better place. A democratic curriculum, then, requires a strong service-learning component.

Dewey argues that the school is a place of formal education through which we must teach democratic habits. In *The Child and the Curriculum* Dewey argues that teachers must teach the subject-matter as useful in a child's experience of the world:

> [The teacher's] problem is that of inducing a vital and personal experiencing. Hence, what concerns him, as teacher, is the ways in which that subject may become a part of experience; what there is in the child's present that is usable with reference to it; how such elements are to be used; how his own knowledge of the subject-matter may assist in

[40] Tanner, Laurel N. *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*. New York: Teachers College press, 1997.

> interpreting the child's needs and doings, and determine the medium in which the child should be placed in order that his growth may be properly directed. He is concerned, not with the subject-matter as such, but with the subject-matter as a related factor in a total and growing experience.[41]

Thus, in addition to teaching democratic habits, subjects taught in school must align with a child's experience of the world. Service learning, then, combines these two principles: it teaches students democratic habits that are useful within a child's experience of the world.

In my high school, and in many high schools around the country, a certain number of community service hours were required to graduate. While the numbers range--in my school it was 60 and in another neighborhood school it was 100--the choice of community service tends to be up to individual students, and submitting service hours requires filling out a simple reflection sheet. In other words, while community service was a part of my high school experience in that I participated in it, service-learning played little to no role in my high school curriculum (or middle/elementary curriculum for that matter). Thus, we must restructure community service/service-learning curricula in order to provide students with the environment to practice democratic habits.

Rahima C. Wade, in *Community Service-Learning : A Guide to Including Service in the Public School Curriculum* similarly argues that "embodying the original mission of public schooling, to create active and informed citizens, community service learning has the potential to assist in reviving an apathetic citizenry through the transformation of civic education."[42] Civic

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[41] Dewey, John. *The Child and the Curriculum*. 28th ed. 1902. Reprint, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2009. https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/29259/pg29259-images.html, 23.

[42] Wade, Rahima Carol, ed. *Community Service-Learning: A Guide to Including Service in the Public School Curriculum*. SUNY Series, Democracy and Education. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997, 1.

education, she argues, must teach intellectual understanding of civics, skills for participation in a democracy, democratic values, and direct participation in schools and communities. Today, civic education fails in these four realms, and particularly fails in creating a meaningful service learning curriculum. Rahima stresses the importance of service as Benjamin Barber understood it: "Service is something we owe to ourselves or to that part of ourselves that is embedded in the civic community. It assumes that our rights and liberties are not acquired for free; that unless we assume the responsibilities of citizens, we will not be able to preserve the liberties they entail"[43] A strong service-learning curriculum, in this way, paves the way for a strong democracy.

Rahima, using studies and evaluations, outlines best practices in service learning. She argues that service learning must "work alongside those in need", "recognize common purpose," "empower those being served," and "connect personal fulfillments with public contribution."[44] This service, though, cannot stand alone, but must be integrated into the curriculum. In this way, service-learning becomes communal; it is not simply individual students volunteering in the community, but a group of students or classrooms learning about the experience of a certain group, and working alongside those in need to improve wellbeing. Service, I believe, does not simply have to be volunteering at a soup kitchen or creating a community garden, but it should include any kind of community interaction that practices a democratic habit, such as students signing people up to vote or lobbying for a certain local policy. Service must not be confused with charity, but understood as an act of citizenship, and service-learning must educate for citizenship, as well as provide the space for these acts of citizenship. Community service and in-school instruction should not be separate entities, but joined together such that students learn democratic habits by way of real-life experience.

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[43] Wade, 15.
[44] Wade, 14.

Bringing it All Together

Karim Ani in *Dear Citizen Math* brings shared knowledge, cased-based learning, and service learning into math class; he takes the wisdom put forth by Dewey, Freire, and Free Schools, and applies them to 21st century math class. Ani argues that today more than ever, math is central to understanding democracy. Math can help us think clearly about the world and better understand the real-world problems we face, and yet the way most schools teach it today fails to do so. Robert "Bob" Moses, for example, founded the Algebra Project--a non-profit organization that aims to "ensure students who have not previously had access to a college preparatory sequence can make the conceptual shift from arithmetic to algebraic thinking."[45] It is based on the idea that "the ongoing struggle for citizenship and equality for minority people is now linked to an issue of math and science literacy."[46] Bob Moses's goal for the Algebra Project undergirds Citizen Math; when we are able to think mathematically, we are better able to understand the world we inhabit, and thus, math is intimately connected to citizenship. In order to forge democratic habits through math class, Ani argues that we must re-evaluate and restructure how and why we teach math to begin with. In most math classes, teachers receive the question: "how will this be useful in the real-world?" The question is inherently a democratic one: it asks how a topic forced upon the student will help the student's experience of the world. Teachers face this problem because math class is neither democratic nor is explicitly relevant to the real world, yet. To make it so, Ani argues that rather than using the world to teach math, math must become a method through which we learn about the world. It must become a tool for kids to understand problems, patterns, or questions. For example, instead of using speeding tickets as an example of

[45] "Who We Are | The Algebra Project INC." Accessed March 15, 2024. https://algebra.org/wp/who-we-are/.

[46] Moses, Robert, and Charles E. Cobb. *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2002.

systems of equations, students would use systems of equations to analyze the ethics and efficacy of speeding tickets in terms of government funding and equity. In doing so, students would not only learn about systems of equations and understand its real world applications, but students would learn how to grapple with real world problems, engage in discourse, and brainstorm solutions to real-world problems. When we look with math, as opposed to looking at it, students learn to engage critically and pluralistically; they will see that the problems we face are complex, can be solved using math, and have more than one right answer. And when confronted with these issues, will continue trying to use math to transform the world for the better. Ani's Citizen Math theory, in this way, further applies the theory and practices promulgated by Moses, Dewey, Friere, and Neill.

Ani highlights a teacher, Alison Strole, who "incorporated authentic real-world activities into her classroom, and then used them as jumping-off points for larger community engagement."[47] In math class, Strole first used systems of equations to question the cost-efficiency of solar panels. After the unit, the class learned about a new city-sponsored power-plant, and met with a representative from city hall to discuss renewable energy policy with the students. Later, after learning about circadian rhythms through sinusoidal functions, the students lobbied the school board to delay school start time to align with adolescent alertness. Strole's classroom combines real-world applications, problem-posing education, and service learning into one classroom curriculum. She shows how curriculum can, and should, reflect experience and how we can teach democratic habits of which students can practice in real world applications. While Strole's community engagement is not the classic version of service, I think it is the kind of service-learning that should be encouraged in classrooms; it teaches students to

[47] Ani, Karim. *Dear Citizen Math*. United States, 2021, 73.

use what they know to take action in the world and transform it for the better. Strole takes the wisdom of Dewey and Freire and brings it to life.

Part V: So What?

Democracy as Good

Free Schools, shared knowledge, problem-based and case-method learning, and service learning are all examples of ways we can forge democratic habits in students through curriculum. Each example teaches democracy in that it gives each student the foundations to develop democratic habits and values such that in the future, they can become active democratic citizens who not only understand the nature of democracy within their communities, but work to create an even more democratic world. The examples teach democracy in terms of content and language, as well as in terms of outcome; they ensure that in practice, students are able to act democratically. I have taken democracy to be a good thing, but as I alluded to at the beginning of this thesis, not everyone takes democracy to be a good.

There are three main arguments against democracy; it is unfit, inefficient, and it does not go far enough. The unfit argument corresponds to the Platonic opposition to democracy; it argues that democracy is unsuitable as a form of government because the masses do not know "the good," so rule by the people would create a society of greed and chaos that would then descend into tyranny. While Plato highlighted a true fear, the solution to his problem is education. If the people are educated to know "the good" or values of a good society, then the people will be equipped to govern themselves. Democracy, then, requires education.

The second argument against democracy is a bureaucratic one; opponents to democracy may argue that it is inefficient in doing the things that a government needs to do. Again, we see this fear realized in many governments today, but in practice, the alternative to democracy

restricts human flourishing. A more efficient government, for example, might be a dictator. A dictator, though, rules tyrannically, rejecting individual freedoms and imposing harsh punishments on those who fail to act according to those singular norms established by the dictator. Democracy, in ruling by majority, allows for pluralism and freedom; it is the form of government that best allows human beings to grow and and succeed as they so choose.

The final argument against democracy is the radical one: democracy does not go far enough. It does not do enough to make the world a better place, and at times, the majority can hold power and still do terrible things. This seems to be the case in the United States today, where an unelected group of nine justices voted to restrict women's bodily autonomy and elected officials have installed barriers to health care for transgender children. And while this opposition to democracy is valid given our understanding of democracy today, it fails to see democracy as a way of life. The United States, and almost every other country in the world, is undemocratic, for individuals do not share democratic habits. It is not enough to give everyone the right to vote and allow them to exercise that vote, but people must understand democracy as a set of values and habits of engaging with the world. Democracy as a way of life must be taught, just as other habits must be taught, in order for us to achieve the vision of democracy we aspire for.

Simply put, democracy is good, but it requires education. Education, in turn, requires democracy. While I have offered various ways to teach democracy, in this section I will dive deeper into *why* we need to be teaching democracy in the ways I have described. What are we doing when we teach democracy in this way, and why is this fundamentally a good thing?

Teaching Democracy Teaches Care

Neil Postman, in *End of Education* tells a story of a fictional New York City that is polluted, chaotic, bankrupt, riddled with conflict, and steeped in hatred. The mayor, as a result,

declares a state of emergency, but could not think of a solution to this problem. The mayor's aide, after reading *Walden*, realized the answer: use the students of the city as a resource to return the city to its flourishing state. Postman recounts, "And so, the curriculum of the public schools of New York City became known as Operation Survival, and all the children from seventh grade through twelfth grade became part of it."[48] The curriculum involves cleaning the streets, planting trees, repairing public buildings, directing traffic, delivering mail, working at day-care centers, substitute for workers incapable of working, publishing a newspaper, and organizing public events. Eventually, the college students join the plan and organize a system of semi-public transportation, run rehab centers, and launch public-health campaigns. As a result, the city begins to thrive again, and citizens of New York City are compelled to take part in its flourishing. While students did not learn the world's capitals or learn calculus, "everybody lived happily ever after–in a state of emergency, but quite able to cope with it."[49] Postman and my moral of this story is that there is value in learning to care for one's community; "a sense of responsibility for the planet is born from a sense of responsibility for one's own neighborhood."[50] He continues, "the fable suggests that we must begin the story of the earth as our spaceship by inventing ways to engage students in the care of their own schools, neighborhoods, and towns."[51] When we teach democratic habits through service learning and real-world applications, and push students to solve the problems they see in their neighborhoods, we teach students to care for the world in which they live. While the practicality of the Spaceship Earth fable is up for debate, it highlights that when students are hands-on grappling with issues they see in their neighborhood, they learn not only how to be an active citizen and fix these problems, but that they have the power to make

[48] Postman, 96.
[49] Postman, 99.
[50] Postman, 100.
[51] Ibid.

the world a better place. Teaching students to be passive members of society does nothing for the good of the world, but teaching students democratic habits of engaging with their environment through curriculum is a realistic application of this fable; the world is our spaceship and we must care for it.

Teaching care is increasingly important. William Damon, in "To Not Fade Away: Restoring Civil Identity Among the Young," highlights that young people today are far less interested in civil life than previous generations. He writes that "in recent Department of Education assessments, only 9 percent of U.S high school students were able to cite two reasons why it is important for citizens to participate in democracy, and only 6 percent could identify two reasons why having a constitution benefits a country."[52] Further, in interviews with young adults through the Center on Adolescence at Stanford, Damon found that "when asked what they would like to change in the world, the students mentioned only such personal concerns as slowing down the pace of life, gaining good friends, either becoming more materially successful or less materially oriented…"[53] This worldview, compared to the efforts of young people historically, is unusual, and as Damon argues, the "stakes are too high" to leave the future of the country in the hands of a generation that cares less. Teaching democratic habits, though, teaches this sense of care. It instills a civil and moral identity in students that prepares them to be active citizens of the world who care about how their actions affect their community. A civil identity is "an allegiance to a systematic set of moral and political beliefs, a personal ideology of sorts, to which a young person forges a commitment. The emotional and moral concomitants to the beliefs are a devotion to one's community and a sense of responsibility to the society at large."[54] Teaching democratic

[52] Ravitch, Diane, and Joseph P. Viteritti, eds. *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, 123.

[53] Ravitch and Viteritti, 125.
[54] Ravitch and Viteritti, 127.

habits enables students to form this civil identity. It teaches them about how the world works, so they can form their own opinions. It teaches them that they are moral agents who must do "good." In forming this civil identity, students form democratic and moral values that establish a sense of genuine care for the communities they inhabit. When we teach democracy we teach democratic habits. When we create democratically structured schools, teach the language of citizenship, community service, and real-world experience, we are fundamentally teaching values of community care, patriotism, and goodness; we teach students that they each have a unique civil identity and have the ability to make the world a better place.

Teaching Democracy Teaches Values, Community, and Growth

Not only does teaching democracy teach students to individually care about spaceship earth, but it teaches students shared values and community building. In many discussions regarding teaching values, the question becomes: whose values do we teach? How do we form a consensus on values? When we teach democracy, there are myriad values that can manifest themselves depending on local community contexts or individuals, but when we teach democratically in the ways I have highlighted, we fundamentally center values of community and growth.

For example, if I were to teach the Constitution in a social studies class, I may begin with a class reading of the preamble and the articles. I may then employ case-based learning, and using a current Supreme Court case, assign groups of students to embody the role of the justices, making a decision based on the Constitution. Students would then present their rulings to the class, teaching the class both about the parts of the Constitution they worked with, and current events issues they grappled with.

The use of case-based learning would give students an understanding of the world they inhabit. They would learn about the structures that make up their society, the problems that individuals, communities, and institutions face, and discuss potential solutions to the problems they encounter. In grappling with applications of the Constitution, students would learn values that the Constitution takes as principal; they would engage with values of justice, equality before the law, freedom, pluralism, and voting. In applying these Constitutional norms to a specific case, students would be able to engage in discussion with their peers on Constitutional interpretations or best practices in both reading and applying the Constitution. Given that there are different ways of interpreting the Constitution, students would practice civil discourse, debate, and pluralism as they encounter viewpoints different from their own. Through this reading, discussion, and problem-solving, students are pushed to grapple with notions of justice and goodness in terms of the law. They are encouraged to ask themselves and each other what decisions make a just or good decision, and whether the right decision can contrast Constitutional precedent. At the end of the lesson, then, if students find an issue they are passionate about when it comes to Constitutional Law, or find something to be unjust, teachers must provide the opportunities to apply this passion through community service or engagement. If students are discussing Dobbs v. Jackson, for example, teachers can provide access to organizations such as the ACLU or Planned Parenthood through which students can work to transform the institutions, practices, or laws they find to be unjust.

In this Social Studies example, students, along with learning about the values implicit and explicit in the Constitution and learning about real-world problems, learn democratic values of community and growth. It teaches community in that it teaches students to work with each other and engage in conversation regarding the world they inhabit. It teaches them about justice,

fairness, and freedom when it comes to United States society (which is itself a community), and how to apply those values within one's own community in order to transform it. The lesson teaches growth in that it instills habits of learning and decision-making regarding a student's values. Critically thinking about the meaning behind a certain decision or action, and how it may affect other individuals or communities is a democratic habit, of which is fostered through this practice. Further, students learn habits of action; when they find something to be an issue within their experience of the world, instead of sitting back and watching injustice unfold, they are taught to put their passion into action. Becoming an active moral agent cannot happen overnight, but requires this nurturing of democratic habits through curriculum.

From a young age, we are expected to understand community, and while many times students develop a sense of community through their experience, it is ever-important to teach it. In this way, bell hooks, in *Teaching Community,* argues that when we teach community, we are teaching a set of values:

> They are 'generosity and fidelity and mercy, a sympathetic imagination, a deep and abiding concern for others, a delight in nature and human company and all forms of beauty, a passion for justice, a sense of restraint and a sense of humor, a relish for skillful work, a willingness to negotiate differences, a readiness for cooperation and affection.' Such a community constantly restores and renews our hope.[55]

Creating a space for students to both experience and learn community is fundamental to a democratic curriculum in that it forges a consensus on values within students and shows them that they are a part of something larger than themselves.

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[55] hooks, bell. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. London: Routledge, 2003, 197.

Similarly, we seldom explicitly teach growth. While Dewey argues that education is growth, what does it mean to teach the value of growth in the classroom, and why might that be a good thing? bell hooks writes that,

> The democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life. Embracing the concept of a democratic education we see teaching and learning as taking place constantly. We share the knowledge gleaned in the classrooms beyond those settings thereby working to challenge the construction of certain forms of knowledge as always and only available to the elite.[56]

While bell hooks is speaking of higher education, her point applies to all levels of schooling; we experience growth when we bring the knowledge we learn in the classroom into our life. Growth in the classroom is synonymous with growth outside the classroom; when we learn about the Constitution in the social studies classroom, we grow as a person experiencing the world, for our world-view is enriched through this knowledge. Further, bell hooks writes, "Since our place in the world is constantly changing, we must be constantly learning to be fully present in the now. If we are not fully engaged in the present we get stuck in the past and our capacity to learn is diminished."[57] Growth, then, involves adapting ourselves to the ever-changing world. And in order to do so, we must constantly engage with the present world as we experience it. We learn to do so through democratic schooling practices, where we are able to form democratic habits, create and experience community, and become fuller versions of ourselves.

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[56] hooks, 41.
[57] hooks, 43.

Embracing a democratic curriculum means embracing values of community and growth in the classroom. It means teaching students to care about the world they live in and pushes them to make it a better place. It involves creating a democratically structured school, incorporating real-world applications and service-learning, and utilizing the language of citizenship within core subjects. In applying these practices, we instill democratic habits through which students can work to achieve democracy. When we teach students that they each have a civil identity and that their actions matter, we teach them how to engage actively and intentionally with the world. We change the narrative of schooling to one of humanization and citizen-making; we change how we understand what school is for.

Changing the Schooling Narrative

Postman writes that "for school to make sense, the young, their parents, and their teacher must have a god to service, or even better, several gods. If they have none, school is pointless…There is no surer way to bring an end to schooling than for it to have no end."[58] In other words, for school to do the things it needs to do and teach the things it needs to teach, there must be a reason behind this teaching. When there is no end goal–when we don't have a common conception of what school is for–school becomes futile. Postman uses the word god as this "transcendent, spiritual idea that gives purpose and clarity to learning;" it is a shared narrative of why we go to school that gives "a sense of continuity and purpose."[59] Without purpose, we are lost.

Postman argues that today, the previous schooling narratives, or the gods we used serve, have failed. The olds gods of civic participation or the great American melting pot no longer

[58] Postman, 4.
[59] Postman, 5-6.

provide a narrative for why we go to school. Instead, the new gods of economic utility, consumership, and technology reign supreme.

The economic utility, or human capital as Jon Shelton in *The Education Myth* names it, encompasses the current schooling narrative that says we go to school in order to be economically prosperous; we go to school to get a job so we can make a lot of money. This narrative, according to Postman, began with Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations and notions of the Protestant Ethic. In the 1930s, FDR's economic bill of rights and GI Bill proposed that education is intimately connected to opportunity. Later, LBJ and the Great Society sought out to tackle growing poverty problems through widespread educational access. Twenty years later, *A Nation At Risk*–a 1983 report by the US National Commission on Excellence in Education–perpetuated this idea that education is the means to economic prosperity. It offered that economic problems can be resolved through proper education of citizens for jobs. As a result, school systems were pushed to implement extreme testing practices to ensure students were meeting national standards. Shelton argues that this story connecting education and economic opportunity encompasses the Education Myth: that education alone can raise socioeconomic status, so the goal of education is to create human capital. Shelton argues that this myth is damaging, for when we rely on education alone, we forget about important factors such as labor reform, a jobs guarantee, universal child care, and other social democratic policies that are necessary to reduce poverty rates.[60] In addition, though, this myth suggests that we go to school to gain monetary success. When this is the goal of schooling, it is no surprise that we create individuals who care solely about their personal networks, fail to engage with their community, and lose faith in democracy. As Postman aptly says, "Any education that is mainly about economic utility is far

[60] Shelton, Jon. *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Place, 2023, 210.

too limited to be useful, and, in any case, so diminishes the world that it mocks one's humanity."[61]

The second god that rules the school, according to Postman, is the god of consumership. Consumership's "basic moral axiom is expressed in the slogan 'whoever dies with the most toys, wins'–that is to say, goodness inherits in those who buy things; evil in those who do not."[62] Consumership, in this way, is intimately connected to the god of economic utility; first you become economically useful, and then you spend that money on fancy things. We go to school then, so we can get a good job that pays good money so we can buy all the things we want. This consumerist god fails, just as the economic utility god fails because materialism does not create community nor does it push students to learn about and engage with the world around them. Why would we try to make the world a better place when the world as it is is able to give us so many fun things? The consumership god aligns goodness with how much stuff you have, so democratic institutions and democratic ways of life obviously fail in a world ruled by this god.

Lastly, Postman argues that the god of technology has taken over much of the schooling narrative. The technology god tells us that technology is the future of the world. It says that technology will change how the world operates and will give us everything we ever wanted at our fingertips; it will change how we learn, how we get information, how we buy things, and how we interact with our friends and neighbors, to name a few. But is this such a good thing? Does this take away from something fundamental about schooling? Arguably yes. Postman articulates that "the god of Technology does not appear interested in the [civilizing] function of schools."[63] The god of technology is interested in making life easier or more efficient. As Heidigger would argue, technology closes knowledge gaps and shrinks distances between

[61] Postman, 31.
[62] Postman, 33.
[63] Postman, 47.

people, places, and ideas, but it brings no nearness in that it fails to humanize or make us present. The technology god of schooling, then, fails because it fails to humanize. It suggests that the goal of schooling is to learn technology so our lives can be easier, but a life of ease lacks meaning and humanity.

The gods of economic utility, consumership, and technology govern our schooling narratives. They say that we go to school to get a job where we can buy cool technology that will make our lives easier. When these gods reign supreme, we see a world that lacks democratic values, lacks meaning, and places material wealth over human flourishing. When we teach democracy, though, we return the old god of American Citizenship back to power. It brings us a legitimate reason for schooling; school teaches us democratic habits, so we can be citizens of the world who engage actively and intentionally in our communities. The American Citizenship god says that the goal of school, broadly speaking, is humanization. bell hooks, in quoting Parker Palmer, puts it well:

> 'Education at its best–this profound human transaction called teaching and learning is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world.' Since our place in the world is constantly changing, we must be constantly learning to be fully present in the now. If we are not fully engaged in the present we get stuck in the past and our capacity to learn is diminished.[64]

Freire's dialogical pedagogy similarly takes humanization as the end goal; it is a "pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes

[64] hooks, 43.

objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation."[65] Oppressors dehumanize the oppressed such that an education for an oppressed group or individual requires teaching for humanization. Thus, Freire's dialogical, problem-posing method of teaching takes love, humility, and faith in humankind as its tenants, and allows for trust, communication, and eventually transformation. When we see the narrative of schooling as one of humanization, we similarly create the foundations for trust, communication, transformation. We are saying that we go to school to become fuller versions of ourselves, who do good things and who care about our communities and the world. The American Citizenship god, in this way, says that our actions matter, and as the Spaceship Earth moral suggests, people are more likely to work to make the world a better place if they are taught that their actions matter.

Rethinking Schooling Practices

When we teach democracy through case-method teaching and real-world applications, service learning, shared knowledge curriculums, and through democratically structured schools, we transform the narrative of schooling from one of economic utility, consumership, and technology, to one of citizenship and humanization. Simply put, when we change the curriculum to a democratic one, we change the narrative of schooling. What does a change in curriculum and a change in narrative mean for schools in practice today? Does making this shift in the ends of schooling change the means of schooling?

While changing the ends does not explicitly change how we structure schools nor does it completely alter the American school system, it forces us to recommit to the public school, challenges us to question our investments in charter schools/vouchers, and reconsider practices such as testing, standards, and the common core.

[65] Freire, 48.

The current god of economic utility emphasizes the individual over the community such that when it comes to schooling, families are to consider solely what works for them. This is not to say that the individual is unimportant when it comes to democracy and community; as I mentioned earlier, it is just as important to nurture the individual in a democracy such that the individual is able to understand the meaning of their actions. Rather, the god of economic utility understands individual economic success to be the singular reason governing decisions. Instead of considering the individual in terms of the group, and the group in terms of the individuals within, the god of economic utility considers solely how the individual can prosper economically. The political right, particularly Besty DeVos, argues that personal freedom is paramount when it comes to education; it is not about a school community or shared school values, but about individual families and students. The human capital god not only prepares students to be of use in the working world, but subjects the school to free market values. It suggests, as Milton Freidman did in 1955, that if individuals have the choice between their crop of schools, they will choose the best one, so bad schools will close and good schools will prosper. This way, he argues, we will eliminate the bad schools. The narrative of human capital and economic utility, then, suggests that individuals make their own choices regarding their education, as it is a personal freedom, and school systems will adapt accordingly. As Jack Schneider and Jennifer Berkshire write in *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door,* "Seventy-five years after Friedman made his radical case for 'denationalizing' education, the idea that market can solve what ails our public schools has become an article of faith."[66] As a result of this narrative, policy-makers on both the left and the right have proposed charter schools and a voucher system. They emphasize that school choice will resolve the problems we see in schools today, such as

[66] Schneider, Jack, and Jennifer Berkshire. *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door: The Dismantling of Public Education and the Future of School*. New York: The New Press, 2020, 26.

low reading and math levels and education inequity. It is also important to note that the voucher system emerged in the South as a response to Brown v. Board; families wanted to maintain the segregated status quo, and vouchers allowed for them to avoid the integration process. Thus, our current investment in the charter school and voucher movement is one not only embedded in individualistic narratives of schooling, but embedded in racism and opposition to integration.

The god of American citizenship and humanization, though, emphasizes the community, and the importance of the neighborhood public school. Public schools are public goods. Taxpayers pay for it; it benefits the good of the community in both the short and long term; everyone is entitled to it; and they operate through democratic processes (i.e. school boards). The public school has a long history in the United States, and access to the public school has been expanded over the course of American history as our definition of citizen expanded, suggesting that historically, those who have access to public school have access to the fruits of American citizenship. As Diane Ravitch says, "The public schools have been and will be inescapably involved in the American search for a viable definition of community."[67] In emphasizing citizenship and community, this new narrative calls for a reinvestment in the public school. While this reinvestment must be in part monetary, it also means a commitment to democracy in public school. It means teaching democratic values, ensuring democratic operations of public schools, making the school a center of community life, and resolving education inequities and the disparities in resources between high and low income communities (perhaps, this involves reconfiguring how we allocate public school funds).

While the American citizenship narrative implies a recommitment to public schooling, it also involves a reckoning with certain practices in schools today: standards, testing, and the

[67] Ravitch, Diane. *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools*. Johns Hopkins University Paperbacks ed. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, 402.

common core. *A Nation at Risk* and No Child Left Behind, while two decades apart, suggested that schools and their students are falling behind. No Child Left Behind imposed national testing in order to hold schools accountable for student progress. If schools did not meet the standards, they would face budgetary restrictions and students attending those schools would be allowed to transfer to a different public school. Later, the Common Core established a set of curriculum standards for schools–and rigid testing of those standards–in an attempt to resolve low student performance. States across the country adopted the Common Core standards, and while today some states have rejected the common core, it is still used widely throughout the country. These practices–standards, testing, and common core–remain a part of this human capital myth. They suggest that poverty rates are intertwined with poor schooling, and in order for students to make their way out of poverty, they must attend a good school. So, we must ensure that these schools are up to par and teaching the things they need to be teaching. In theory, there is nothing wrong with wanting to ensure schools are teaching the right things and teaching them well. In fact, it seems like a good thing when we consider applications of Hirsch's shared knowledge curriculum. We must question, though, whether standards of reading and math alone, and testing according to those standards, is the best practice. Perhaps we should be testing a variety of subjects, or citizenship applications of their knowledge? Further, testing as a way of measuring school success is not always helpful when trying to reinvest in public school. If test scores are low, perhaps investment should be put into that school, for the community is likely facing a lack of resources. We must ask, then, whether there is a different way of measuring school success. When it comes to common core and testing, we similarly must rethink what we consider to be common knowledge and whether accountability forges or counteracts democratic values of community and growth. While there are democratic values that are universal, there are also local

community values or habits that require teaching. For example, certain communities in the country might value agricultural knowledge, whereas other communities might value the classics. This is not to say that the agricultural community should only learn about plants, but that there is a need in their curriculum based on community values that must be supplemented by math and reading and science and history and civics. We cannot be so rushed to decide that in 7th grade we are learning algebra and poetry, and if students do not meet the standards of algebra and poetry, their school will face constraints. While the purpose of this thesis is not to advocate for specific educational policies, it is important to understand how when we change the narrative of schooling from one of economic utility and human capital, consumership, and technology to one of democratic citizenship and humanization, we are forced to reconsider school policies and practices to better align with our end goals.

Why is it important that we question conceptions of schooling? Schooling is a practice in humanization and growth, so we cannot continue with the same methods of humanization and growth as our students, cities, and world change. To maintain the same schooling practices without consistent re-examination of whether they actually work, would be a failure in education and a failure in democracy. It suggests that what we need to know stays stagnant, student experience is unchanging, and school structures must be robotic, churning out a singular type of individual. In a diverse and ever-changing world, questioning, challenging, and rethinking is necessary, for it is a practice in human enrichment. When we question what we teach, how we teach it, and why we teach, we are forced to change as the world changes, and to continuously reassess how to practice humanization.

Conclusion

My thesis asks: what would it mean to teach democracy and why might that be a good thing? My answer is that teaching democracy requires a curriculum that cultivates democratic habits in students, both in content and in function, such that they become active civil agents. This is a good thing, I argue, because it is a practice in humanization. It is the place of schooling to nurture students to become fuller versions of themselves, who care about the world we live in, so a democratic curriculum, in teaching democracy and practicing humanization, is a good thing for students and a good thing for the world.

Teaching democracy involves teaching a set of habits, of which ensure one's actions are good for the community as well as one's, establishing consensus upon shared values, acknowledging pluralistic experience, and actively working to transform the world into a better one. We can teach this through teaching a democratic curriculum that aligns with real-world experience, and pushes students to both understand, engage with, and transform the world around them. It requires a curriculum that is democratic in structure, in content, in values, and in action. Free schools, for example, are democratic in structure. Case-method teaching is democratic in content, and shared knowledge curricula is democratic in values. Service learning is democratic through action. A curriculum, then, that brings these things together, as Alison Strole does in Karim Ani's *Dear Citizen Math*, is the sort of curriculum that schools must incorporate in order to teach democracy.

Once we teach democracy in these ways, we begin to change the narrative of school. We suggest that school, as opposed to being for economic gain or monetary success, is for American citizenship and humanization. And when we question the narrative, we are forced to reconsider

certain policies and practices that have become normalized within American schooling; we are forced to reassess our methods of humanization and grapple with what we consider to be good, for if we want a world full of goodness, we need to teach children goodness. Teaching democracy in the classroom, I argue, encompasses, at least in some part, this good. Education and democracy rely on each other; in order to achieve a democratic nation and democratic world, we must have democratic schools with democratic curricula. In doing so, we teach how to care for the world.

When it comes to schools in practice, then, how do we incorporate these ideas? If a school administrator were to read my thesis, for example, what would I want them to take away and what changes would I want them to make? Every school community is different, so I cannot offer a specific topic, community service requirement, case, or topic that a given school must incorporate. I can, though, offer a list of questions an administrator or curriculum-writer could consider before writing curriculum or when considering school practices.

For each curricular unit (whether grade, semester, or topic), regardless of the subject, ask yourself what shared knowledge you want students to know in this unit. What values or citizenship language do you want students to learn? Then, ask yourself what habit(s) you want your students to take away from this unit. How do you want them to engage with the world after they have learned this content? After answering this question, engage in a continuous dialogue with the students themselves over the course of the unit; what curiosities do these topics present and what problems are they facing? Are there ways you can tailor their learning to the problems they are experiencing such that they can better understand the world around them? As you engage with your students, construct a case relating to their experience of the world. Through this case, they should practice not only the shared knowledge they learned, but the habits you

wanted your students to develop. Further, ask yourself if there is a way to connect this case to the community; is there a way students can engage in service through this case? Is there an organization or institution that engages in this work that they can help? In addition to these specific curricular questions, administrators must consider school operations. While I do not think all schools need to be Free Schools, administrators should ask themselves whether they are serving their constituents fairly, the constituents being students, teachers, and parents alike. Perhaps, administrators host general school meetings like that of Summerhill, or send out surveys or voting forms when making school decisions.

This practical checklist not only pushes administrators to adhere to a democratic values, but also cultivates a stronger connection between the local community and the school. In consistently practicing service learning and considering the experiences of school members, the school becomes a center for community. Further, it ensures that schools are adapting to shared democratic values of the community. In considering the voices of the students and community members, it practices the values of community, growth, and pluralism, setting the foundation for not only a democratic school with democratic students, but a more democratic community.

Democracy allows for human wellbeing and the full realization of human capabilities. It allows for people to make decisions regarding their own lives and allows for a fuller understanding of community. It can only succeed, though, when citizens are educated for democracy. It is only when citizens understand the language of citizenship, know what it means to be an active member of a community, practice empathy and service, and hold knowledge of the operations and history of their government and community that we can achieve a true democracy that pushes each individual to thrive and transforms the world for the better.

As I embark on my journey as a middle school teacher, I carry with me the insights and convictions gleaned from writing this thesis. I am committed to fostering democratic citizenship, critical inquiry, and humanization in my classroom, and to continually assess and refine my teaching practices in service of a more democratic and compassionate world. I remain steadfast in my belief that teaching democracy is not only a practical necessity but a moral imperative. By embracing the complexity and dynamism of democracy, and by engaging students in meaningful dialogue and reflection, we can cultivate a generation of empowered and compassionate individuals who are equipped to navigate the complexities of our interconnected world.

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