Democratic Schools

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Chapter 1. The Case for Democratic Schools

by James A. Beane and Michael W. Apple

Pasadena, CA, 1937.

> A group of 3rd graders has spent several weeks studying problems in their school, homes, neighborhoods, and community. Besides looking at problems they know of, they have also gathered examples from parents, teachers, and community officials. After a month of research and discussion, they collect their recommendations for solving these problems in a booklet that will be distributed throughout the community.

Baltimore, MD, 1953.

> The streets in one neighborhood of this city are filled for a week by high school students conducting a door-to-door voter registration drive among ethnic minority residents. This is but one of many projects they have worked on this year, including a civil defense survey, a community health campaign, and a study of housing relocation problems.

Port Jarvis, NY, 1972.

> Though it is a cold, snowy night, nearly 125 students, teachers, administrators, parents, board members, and representatives of various community organizations are meeting to consider projects they might undertake to redesign their schools. Among others, they will make arrangements to distribute school newsletters in languages other than English, plan a new community youth center, start a radio program produced by students, set up mentorships for young people with adults in the community, and arrange to make the school more available for community activities.

Ulysses, PA, 1979.

> Just as they do every Friday afternoon, the students and teachers in the elementary school gather today to discuss ongoing schoolwide projects and problems. The major issue this week is that someone has written graffiti on a school wall. After nearly a half-hour of debate, three proposals are put forth. The group votes to establish a new rule: anyone defacing school property will spend their free time over three days working with the school custodian.

Belvidere, IL, 1990.

> Looking out a classroom window at the dumpster below, a student asks the teacher, "Where does that garbage go?" Just as curious, the teacher arranges for a class field trip to an area landfill. Concerned about the size and contents of the landfill, the students undertake a campaign for conservation and recycling in their school. Over several months, their efforts begin to take hold. Though they are just 1st graders, they have made a difference in their school.

Madison, WI, 1991.

> On a warm September day, a group of nearly 60 middle school students and their teachers are working together to create their curriculum out of questions and concerns they have about themselves and their world. Eventually they cluster their questions into themes like "Living in the Future," "Problems in the Environment," "Isms," and "Conflict." After selecting their first theme and planning relevant activities, they will spend the year trying to answer those questions—their questions.

All of us have heard stories like these and know that while not rare, they are unusual. All took place in public schools. All involved real young people, real educators, and real communities no different on the surface than thousands of others. Yet there is something about these stories, a sometimes elusive feeling, that appeals to a deep sense of what a worthwhile and valuable education ought to look like. What are these people working on? Who is involved? How are they working together? Who benefits from such work? If we think about these stories and questions, we may eventually begin to see what is really happening. And perhaps we will begin to remember a now half-forgotten idea that was to guide the purposes and programs of our public schools. The idea was, and is, democracy.

In the midst of widespread attacks on education, we must keep alive the long tradition of democratic school reform that has played such a valuable role in making many schools lively and powerful places for those who go to them. Rather than giving up on the idea of the "public" schools and moving down the path toward privatization, we need to focus on schools that work. Despite some people's relentless attempts to make us think otherwise, we do not have to resign ourselves to choosing between a failing public school system and market initiatives such as voucher plans or for-profit "public" schools run by private firms like the Edison Project or Education Alternatives Inc. There are public schools throughout this country where the hard work of teachers, administrators, parents, community activists, and students has paid off. These are the schools that are alive with excitement, even in sometimes depressing and difficult circumstances. These are the schools in which teachers and students alike are engaged in serious work that results in rich and vital learning experiences for all.

The idea of democratic schools has fallen on hard times, however. All around us, we can see the signs. Public schools are called on to educate all of our children, yet are simultaneously blamed for the social and economic disparities that severely detract from their chances of successfully doing so. Local decision making is glorified in political rhetoric at the same time that legislation is introduced to put in place national standards, a national curriculum, and national tests. Demands are made to emphasize critical thinking while censorship of school programs and materials increases. Census figures display growing cultural diversity while pressure is applied to keep the curriculum within the narrow boundaries of the Western cultural tradition. The needs of business and industry are suddenly the preeminent goals of our educational system. Education in morality and ethics is reduced to a litany of behavior traits. Privileged groups seek to flee comprehensive, diverse public schools through vouchers, tax credits, "choice" plans, and exclusionary programs for their "gifted" children. Federal officials pronounce the public schools a failure while effectively suppressing a report that shows these officials have misused their own statistics (Jensen 1994).

Could it be that the century-long struggle for democratic purposes and practices in education and schooling never occurred? How could our collective memory have failed so easily? *Thematic unit teaching* and *curriculum integration* have become buzz words in educational circles, but have we forgotten that both concepts have their roots in the problem-centered "core" approaches advocated by earlier progressive social reconstructionists? How can we disconnect the call for heterogeneous grouping, advocated by so many groups today, from the longer struggle of the civil rights movement? Are "developmentally appropriate" practices a recent invention, or do they stretch back to the progressive, child-centered schools created early in this century? When we speak of cooperative learning today, shall we simply ignore the cooperative group process work done in schools and communities as part of democratic movements since the 1920s? How can we seem puzzled by ways to connect schools to their communities when so many stories of significant service projects can be found in the professional literature of at least the past sixty years?

Rosa Parks is often portrayed during Black History Month as simply a "tired, older woman" who wanted to sit down on a bus. But her courageous act on that bus came after months of work on resistance and civil disobedience at the Highlander Folk School. Likewise, many of our most trusted and powerful ideas about schooling are the hard-won gains of long and courageous efforts to make our schools more democratic (see, for example, Rugg 1939). We are the beneficiaries of those efforts, and we have an obligation to carry forward the demanding dream of public schools for a democratic society.

The questions raised here are meant to remind us of that half-forgotten dream, to rouse us from the stupor we fell into nearly twenty years ago. Although our memories may have become blurred, we can still recall that public schools are essential to democracy. We cannot help but be jolted wide awake when discussions about what works in schools, what should be done in schools, make no mention of the role of public schools in expanding the democratic way of life. And so we must make the case again.

The Meaning of Democracy

Those of us who live in the United States claim that democracy is the central tenet of our social and political relations. It is, we say, the basis for how we govern ourselves, the concept by which we measure the wisdom and worth of social policies and shifts, the ethical anchor we seek when our political ship seems to drift. And it is the standard we use to measure the political progress of other countries as well as their trade status with our own.

It is not surprising, then, that the word "democracy," seems to be heard more frequently these days. In many places around the world, oppressed peoples struggle for human and civil rights. Dictatorships and popularly elected governments are overthrown at a startling rate. In the United States, growing numbers of people claim that politicians at all levels are no longer in touch with their constituents. Conflict among political, religious, and cultural groups fuels debate over free speech, privacy, land use, lifestyles, and, throughout it all, the rights of the individual in relation to the interests of the larger society. Amid this dissonance, the idea of democracy presumably serves as a crucial benchmark for judging events and ideas.

Central tenets and ethical anchors, however, also tend to be converted into rhetorical slogans and political codes to gain popular support for all manner of ideas. Thus, they are fraught with ambiguity. "Democracy" is no exception. Woodrow Wilson understood this well when he deflected opposition to U.S. involvement in World War I with the virtually unassailable statement that our soldiers were fighting "to make the world safe for democracy." Calling forth the word "democracy" did the trick then and has done so for a wide array of political and military maneuvers since.

The meaning of democracy is just as ambiguous in our own times, and the rhetorical convenience of that ambiguity is more evident than ever (Apple 1988). One can understand, for example, how claims

for democracy could be used to shore up movements for civil rights, expanded voting privileges, and protection of free speech. Democracy is also used, however, to further the causes of free market economies and school-choice vouchers, and to defend the dominance of two major political parties. We hear the democracy defense used countless times everyday to justify almost anything people want to do: "Hey, we live in a democracy, right?"

On the other hand, it is not uncommon to hear some people say that democracy has simply become irrelevant, that it is too inefficient or dangerous in an increasingly complex world. For these people, the democracy defense itself has become cumbersome or, perhaps, not sufficient to get them what they want. In a society like that of the United States, where there are clear divisions of wealth and power, the freedoms and ambiguity associated with democracy have clearly benefited some people more than others. Efforts to sharpen the definition of democracy and extend its meaning throughout society are seen by some of the more privileged people of this country as threats to their own status and power. To understand this view, we need only look at the startling contradiction between the movement for greater school achievement on the one hand and the resistance to equitable spending for all schools on the other.

Under these complicated conditions, a book on democratic schools may seem almost foolhardy. After all, if the meaning of democracy is so confused in the larger society, how can we possibly settle on its meaning for everyday life in schools? That risk in mind, we have gone ahead, buoyed by certain beliefs. We believe that democracy does mean something and that bringing that meaning to light is critical at a time when many citizens are vigorously debating the future course of our schools. Moreover, we find it hard to imagine that people who have known the privileges of democracy would so easily give them up. We find it even harder to imagine that they would not want these privileges for their children, indeed for all people. We admit to having what Dewey and others have called the "democratic faith," the fundamental belief that democracy has a powerful meaning, that it can work, and that it is necessary if we are to maintain freedom and human dignity in our social affairs.

Democracy works in multiple ways in social affairs. Most of us who attended school in the United States (and perhaps elsewhere) were taught that democracy is a form of political governance involving the consent of the governed and equality of opportunity. For example, we learned that citizens may directly and fully participate in such events as elections while being represented in other matters by those we elect to federal and state legislatures as well as boards and committees governing local school policy.

Less explicitly taught were the conditions on which a democracy depends, the foundations of "the democratic way of life" (Beane 1990). It is these conditions and their extension through education that are the central concerns of democratic schools. Among such conditions are the following:

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.
4. Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good."
5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an "ideal" to be pursued as an "idealized" set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people.
7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life.

If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led (Dewey 1916). Although common sense alone tells us this is a true statement, there is perhaps no more problematic concept in education than that of democratic schools, a concept that some consider almost an oxymoron. How can this be so? Simply put, many people believe that democracy is nothing more than a form of federal government and thus does not apply to schools and other social institutions. Many also believe that democracy is a right of adults, not of young people. And some believe that democracy simply cannot work in schools.

Others are committed to the idea that the democratic way of life is built upon opportunities to learn what it is about and how to lead it. They believe that the schools, as a common experience of virtually all young people, have a moral obligation to introduce them to the democratic way of life. They know, as well, that such a life is learned by experience. It is not a status to be attained only after other things are learned. Moreover, they believe that democracy extends to all people, including the young. Finally, they believe that democracy is neither cumbersome nor dangerous, that it can work in societies and it can work in schools. As Maxine Greene (1985, p. 4) writes, "Surely it is an obligation of education in a democracy to empower the young to become members of the public, to participate, and play articulate roles in the public space."

But those committed to creating democratic schools also understand that doing so involves more than the education of the young. Democratic schools are meant to be democratic places, so the idea of democracy also extends to the many roles that adults play in the schools. This means that professional educators as well as parents, community activists, and other citizens have a right to fully informed and critical participation in creating school policies and programs for themselves and young people.

Proponents of democratic schools also realize, sometimes painfully, that exercising democracy involves tensions and contradictions. Democratic participation in decision making, for example, opens the way for antidemocratic ideas such as the continuing demands for censorship of materials, the use of public tax vouchers for private school tuition, and the maintenance of historical inequities in school life. Furthermore, there always looms the possibility of the illusion of democracy, in which authorities may invite participation so as to "engineer consent" for predetermined decisions (Graebner 1988). Such contradictions and tensions point to the fact that bringing democracy to life is always a struggle. But beyond them lies the possibility for professional educators and citizens to work together in creating more democratic schools that serve the common good of the whole community.

This book is for and about educators who are committed to democracy, who value the democratic way of life, who believe that schools can be democratic places, and who have the courage to carry those beliefs into action. In several chapters we will hear some of these educators describe, in their own voices, how they have brought the idea of democracy to life in their schools and classrooms. These are remarkable stories inasmuch as the very idea of democratic schools has proved to be so elusive to the educational community. The stories are not filled with the easy promises and slick slogans of packaged programs or systems. Instead, like almost all school stories, they reveal the hard work and commitment of real educators struggling to create and maintain arrangements that reveal the deeply held values that they, and we, believe must be acted on now. The authors of this book are fundamentally dissatisfied with the conservative solutions usually put at center stage over the past decade: tighter centralized control, standardization of content, more reductive testing, and so on. All of us believe that we must move beyond handwringing and find real answers to the question "What works in schools?"

What Is a Democratic School?

Before presenting the real life stories in this book, we want to offer a context for their telling. What is a democratic school? What might we expect to see if we visited one? What are its underlying

principles? How has the concept of democratic schools emerged over time? What threatens the existence of these schools? How can it be that these stories are so remarkable in a society that purports to be democratic?

Democratic schools, like democracy itself, do not happen by chance. They result from explicit attempts by educators to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life (see, for example, Bastian et al. 1986; Wood 1988, 1992). These arrangements and opportunities involve two lines of work. One is to create democratic structures and processes by which life in the school is carried out. The other is to create a curriculum that will give young people democratic experiences.

Democratic Structures and Processes

To say that democracy rests on the consent of the governed is almost a cliché, but in a democratic school it is true that all of those directly involved in the school, including young people, have the right to participate in the process of decision making. For this reason, democratic schools are marked by widespread participation in issues of governance and policy making. Committees, councils, and other schoolwide decision-making groups include not only professional educators, but also young people, their parents, and other members of the school community. In classrooms, young people and teachers engage in collaborative planning, reaching decisions that respond to the concerns, aspirations, and interests of both. This kind of democratic planning, at both the school and the classroom levels, is not the "engineering of consent" toward predetermined decisions that has too often created the illusion of democracy, but a genuine attempt to honor the right of people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives.

We must remember, however, that local decision making must still be guided by democratic values. It is one of the contradictions of democracy that local, populist politics do not always serve democratic ends. After all, left entirely to local discretion, we might still have schools characterized by legal racial segregation and denial of access to all but the wealthy. In short, the realization of democratic schools does in part depend on selective intervention of the state, especially where the process and content of local decision making serve to disenfranchise and oppress selected groups of people. While such intervention is usually unpopular among those who have sought exclusive power, it serves as a reminder that the wide distribution of rights and other democratic values are meant to be more than principles on paper.

Our own times offer many illustrations of the tension between the state's obligation to safeguard democracy and the democratic right of interest groups to air their views. For example, public schools in a democratic society are meant to offer access to, and critical examination of, a wide range of ideas. Meanwhile, various special interest groups, especially religious fundamentalists, demand that ideas and materials open to consideration in schools be limited to those supporting their groups' own values (Delfattore 1993). At the same time, local groups across the political spectrum are troubled by moves to create a national curriculum in which the range of knowledge studied is limited to that deemed important by select groups at the national level. The idea of widespread participation in school affairs as a feature of democratic schools is thus not as simple as inviting participation, because the right to "have a say" introduces questions about how various viewpoints fit into the fragile equation balancing special interests and the larger "common good" of the democratic community.

Those involved in democratic schools see themselves as participants in communities of learning. By their very nature, these communities are diverse, and that diversity is prized, not viewed as a problem. Such communities include people who reflect differences in age, culture, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, aspirations, and abilities. These differences enrich the community and the range of views it might consider. Separating people of any age on the basis of these differences or using labels to stereotype them simply creates divisions and status systems that detract from the

democratic nature of the community and the dignity of the individuals against whom such practices work so harshly.

While the community prizes diversity, it also has a sense of shared purpose. No matter what the privatizers or those who want economic rationality to drive schools say, democracy is not simply a theory of self-interest that gives people license to pursue their own goals at the expense of others; the common good is a central feature of democracy. For this reason, the communities of learners in democratic schools are marked by an emphasis on cooperation and collaboration rather than competition. People see their stake in others, and arrangements are created that encourage young people to improve the life of the community by helping others.

In all these arrangements, and in the policy decisions that support them, people in democratic schools persistently emphasize structural equity. While initial access to educational opportunities is understood to be a necessary aspect of democratic schools, access alone is not considered sufficient for their realization. In an authentically democratic community, all young people are also considered to have the right of access to all programs in the school and to the outcomes the school values. For this reason, those in democratic schools seek to assure that the school includes no institutional barriers to young people. Every effort is made to eliminate tracking, biased testing, and other arrangements that so often deny such access on grounds of race, gender, and socioeconomic class.

Educators who are committed to democracy realize that sources of inequity in the school are likely to be found in the community as well. At the very least, they understand that the possibilities arising from democratic experiences in the school may too easily be washed away by life on the outside (Gutmann 1987). In seeing themselves as part of the larger community, they seek to extend democracy there, not only for the young but for all people. In short, they want democracy on a large scale; the school is just one of the sites on which they focus. This is a crucial point. The educational landscape is littered with the remains of failed school reforms, many of which failed because of the social conditions surrounding the schools. Only those reforms that recognize these conditions and actively engage them are likely to make a lasting difference in the lives of the children, educators, and communities served by the schools.

It is this last point in particular that distinguishes democratic schools from other kinds of "progressive" schools, such as those that are simply humanistic or child-centered. Democratic schools are both of those in many ways, but their vision extends beyond purposes such as improving the school climate or enhancing students' self-esteem. Democratic educators seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in school, but to change the conditions that create them. For this reason, they tie their understanding of undemocratic practices inside the school to larger conditions on the outside. The case for heterogeneous grouping, for example, is made partly on grounds of increased academic and social achievement, but more broadly on grounds of justice and equitable access as profound social issues (Oakes 1985). Like other progressive educators, those involved with democracy care deeply about young people, but they also understand that such caring requires them to stand firm against racism, injustice, centralized power, poverty, and other gross inequities in school and society.

The initial sketch of the structures and processes essential to democratic schools can be done rather quickly, but the fully rendered picture is not so easily realized. The work involved in organizing and keeping alive a democratic school is exhausting and ripe with conflict. After all, despite the rhetoric of democracy in our society and the commonsense idea that the democratic way of life is learned through democratic experiences, schools have been remarkably undemocratic institutions. While democracy emphasizes cooperation among people, too many schools have fostered competition—for grades, for status, for resources, for programs, and so on. While democracy depends upon caring for the common good, too many schools, stimulated by the influence of political agendas imposed from outside, have emphasized an idea of individuality based almost entirely on self-interest. While democracy prizes diversity, too many schools have largely reflected the interests and aspirations of

the most powerful groups in this country and ignored those of the less powerful. While schools in a democracy would presumably demonstrate how to achieve equal opportunity for all, too many schools are plagued by structures like tracking and ability grouping that deny equal opportunity and results to many, particularly the poor, people of color, and women.

Those who are committed to democratic education are often placed in a position of conflict with the dominant traditions of schooling. At almost every turn, their ideas and efforts are likely to be resisted by both those who benefit from the inequities of schools and those who are more interested in efficiency and hierarchical power than in the difficult work of transforming schools from the bottom up. The frustrations involved in creating democratic schools are only exceeded by the more ambitious task of maintaining them in the face of nondemocratic currents in public opinion and educational policy. But democratic educators understand that democracy does not present an "ideal state" crisply defined and waiting to be attained. Rather, a more democratic experience is built through their continual efforts at making a difference. The undertaking is not an easy one; it is filled with contradictions, conflict, and controversy. As the old saying goes, "It was ten miles into the woods and it's ten miles out."

A Democratic Curriculum

The structures and processes discussed so far generally define the quality of everyday life in schools. As part of the longstanding traditions and deep structures of the school, they also offer powerful teachings about what and whom the school values. For this reason, they constitute a kind of "hidden" curriculum by which people learn significant lessons about justice, power, dignity, and self-worth. Democratizing these structures and processes is a crucial aspect of the schools portrayed here, but a more complete version also includes creative work toward bringing democracy to the planned or overt curriculum.

Since democracy involves the informed consent of people, a democratic curriculum emphasizes access to a wide range of information and the right of those of varied opinion to have their viewpoints heard. Educators in a democratic society have an obligation to help young people seek out a range of ideas and to voice their own. Unfortunately, many schools persistently shirk this obligation in several ways. First, they narrow the range of school-sponsored knowledge to what we might call "official" or high-status knowledge that is produced or endorsed by the dominant culture (Apple 1993). Second, they silence the voices of those outside the dominant culture, particularly people of color, women, and, of course, the young. This observation can be substantiated with little more than a glance at textbooks, reading lists, and curriculum guides.

What's most disturbing is that all too many schools have taught this official, high-status knowledge as though it were "truth" arisen from some immutable, infallible source. Those committed to a more participatory curriculum understand that knowledge is socially constructed, that it is produced and disseminated by people who have particular values, interests, and biases. This is simply a fact of life, since all of us are formed by our cultures, genders, geographies, and so on. In a democratic curriculum, however, young people learn to be "critical readers" of their society. When confronted with some knowledge or viewpoint, they are encouraged to ask questions like: Who said this? Why did they say it? Why should we believe this? and Who benefits if we believe this and act upon it?

To clarify this point, consider an example from a classroom observed by one of this book's editors. The teacher and students were engaged in a discussion of "current events," using material from newspapers and focusing on "natural disasters." How we think about natural disasters and whose definition of what they are is crucial. For instance, we are now (unfortunately) quite used to seeing pictures of disasters in which thousands of people lose their lives to storms, drought, and so on. Like the children in that classroom, we are told to think of them as "natural" disasters. But is this seemingly neutral way of understanding current events really neutral, or are particular values smuggled in or omitted in subtle ways?

Part of the discussion that went on in that classroom provides a powerful reminder of why such a question is important. The students noted the massive mud slides that had recently occurred in South America; large numbers of people were killed or badly injured as torrential rains washed their houses down the mountainsides. Yet a closer examination reveals that little about this disaster was "natural." Every year in South America there are rains, and every year people die. This particular year, an entire side of the mountain gave way; the thousands of people living on it lost their lives. No one in the valleys—the safe and fertile land—died.

Poor families are forced to live on the dangerous hillsides because this is the only land left on which they can afford to eke out a meager existence. People crowd onto the mountainsides because of poverty and historical land ownership patterns that are grossly unequal. Hence, the problem is not the yearly rain—a natural occurrence—but the unequal economic structures that allow a small minority of individuals to control the very lives of the majority of people in that region.

This altered and more complete understanding of the problem is rich in pedagogic and curricular possibilities. Helping students to understand the different ways this "current event" could be interpreted, and the benefits to different groups of people each interpretation brings, could ultimately lead them to a richer and more ethically committed sensitivity to the societies around them (Apple 1990).

A mathematics class in an urban school provides another example of how questions are used in a democratic classroom. Students in this class were regularly given a word problem involving the cost of a monthly bus pass. They were asked to calculate whether it was cheaper to buy a monthly pass or to pay each time one went to and from work. In this particular instance, given the number of workdays that the problem writer specified, the correct answer was to pay each time. Yet built into this problem is a set of assumptions that have little bearing on the realities of these young people's lives or those of their parents.

The students knew this answer was simply wrong. After all, many of their parents worked two part-time jobs to support themselves and their families. These jobs were often at fast-food restaurants and were the only jobs available in that community after the factories had moved to take advantage of lower wages and tax breaks in other parts of the world. Thus, in the experience of these children, a person used the bus at least four times a day to get to and from work, work that was without benefits, was low paid, and was often dead-end.

This curriculum was obviously more than a little biased and insensitive. But the teacher creatively used the bias, asking students to reflect on what was wrong with this example and to think about how mathematics helped them understand their own and their parents' daily lives. In essence, she asked them to answer a question similar to those we asked above: *From whose perspective are we seeing the world in this material?* (Ladson-Billings in press). By weaving this question into the entire mathematics unit, she integrated mathematics into students' everyday lives, thus giving their work more of an impact than was ever possible in the supposedly neutral standard curriculum that was connected to the supposedly neutral standardized achievement tests that determined those young persons' futures.

At the very least, each of these examples points to the fact that someone's tradition, someone's construction of what is important to know and how it should be used, is always incorporated into our planned curriculum, often in hidden ways. As in the example of the mathematics class, however, a democratic curriculum seeks to move beyond the "selective tradition" of knowledge and meanings endorsed by the dominant culture, toward a wider range of views and voices (Williams 1961, Apple 1990). In a democratic society, no one individual or interest group can claim sole ownership of possible knowledge and meaning. Likewise, a democratic curriculum includes not only what adults think is important, but also the questions and concerns that young people have about themselves and their world. A democratic curriculum invites young people to shed the passive role of knowledge

consumers and assume the active role of "meaning makers." It recognizes that people acquire knowledge by both studying external sources and engaging in complex activities that require them to construct their own knowledge.

As we have previously seen, the democratic way of life engages the creative process of seeking ways to extend and expand the values of democracy. This process, however, is not simply a participatory conversation about just anything. Rather, it is directed toward intelligent and reflective consideration of problems, events, and issues that arise in the course of our collective lives. A democratic curriculum involves continuous opportunities to explore such issues, to imagine responses to problems, and to act upon those responses. For example, the curriculum includes learning experiences organized around problems and issues such as "Conflict," "The Future of Our Community," "Justice," "Environmental Politics," and so on.

Moreover, the disciplines of knowledge are not simply categories of "high culture" for children to absorb and accumulate; they are sources of insight and information that might be brought to bear on problems of living, lenses through which to look at those issues that confront us (Beane 1993). It is this last point that we can use to understand, for example, how talk about curriculum integration needs to move beyond mere questions about how to connect present pieces of the curriculum to a larger conversation involving what those connections might be about. As Dewey (1938, p. 49) pointed out:

> What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his [sic] soul; loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur.

Despite democratic claims about equal opportunity, many obstacles still block the path of nonprivileged young people in our schools—for instance, the overuse of standardized tests. One of the historic problems of many progressive curriculum ideas (and one reason they have often lacked support in nonprivileged communities) is that they appear to deemphasize the kind of official knowledge and skills that young people need to negotiate their way past the gatekeepers of socioeconomic access (Delpit 1986, 1988).

We previously noted that democratic schools are in part distinguished from other kinds of progressive schools in that they explicitly seek change in antidemocratic conditions in the school and society. Educators who work in democratic schools, however, are also acutely aware that such conditions, and the obstacles to larger access, must be reckoned with until they are changed. For this reason, a democratic curriculum seeks to help students become knowledgeable and skilled in many ways, including those required by the gatekeepers of socioeconomic access. In short, democratic educators live with the constant tension of seeking a more significant education for young people while still attending to the knowledge and skills expected by powerful educational forces whose interests are anything but democratic. Thus, we cannot ignore dominant knowledge. Having it does open some doors. But we must be careful in our interpretation here, because we do not want to endorse a continuation of the rigid "drill and skill" programs that so often constitute the school experiences of nonprivileged children. These children, too, have a right to the best of our progressive ideas. Our task is to reconstruct dominant knowledge and employ it to help, not hinder, those who are least privileged in this society.

The matter of creating a democratic curriculum is almost certain to involve conflict and contention. Practically all that is included in this sketch comes up against much of the dominant and longstanding view of what the planned curriculum ought to be about. The possibility of hearing a wide range of views and voices is often seen as a threat to the dominant culture, especially since some of those voices offer interpretations of issues and events quite different from those traditionally taught in

schools. Worse yet, encouraging young people to critically analyze issues and events raises the possibility that they might call dominant interpretations (and teachings) into question. The same is true for organizing the curriculum around major social problems and issues, but this arrangement also comes into conflict with the sterilized version of knowledge and skill that is part of the separate-subject, discipline-centered, "high culture" approach to curriculum. And, finally, the possibility that young people might contribute their own questions and concerns to the curriculum raises the threat of touching on issues that reveal the ethical and political contradictions that permeate our society and of detracting from the values this society says it upholds.

All of these sources of resistance have been encountered repeatedly by those committed to democratic schooling. The resistance is not always couched in clear and explicit terms, however. For example, there are those who say that young people should not take on social issues because they are not ready to understand the complexities involved or because they might become depressed. Such arguments, of course, entirely ignore the fact that the young are real people living out real lives in our society; many of them know all too well, from their own lived experiences, about the consequences of racism, poverty, gender bias, homelessness, and so on. Obviously, then, those arguments simply seek to avoid the possibility that young people might come to see the political, ethical, and social contradictions that detract from their own dignity and seek to act against them.

It is important to note again that the concept of democratic schools is not intended only for the experiences of students. Adults, too, including professional educators, have a right to experience the democratic way of life in schools. We have already cited one example with regard to participation in determining policy and other decision making. But just as young people have a right to help create arrangements for their own education, so do teachers and other educators have a right to help create their own programs for professional growth based upon their perceptions of problems and issues in their classrooms, schools, and professional lives.

Furthermore, teachers have a right to have their voices heard in creating the curriculum, especially that intended for the particular young people they work with. Even the most casual of observers cannot help but notice that this right has been seriously eroded over the past several decades as curriculum decisions and even specific curriculum plans have been centralized in state and district offices of education. The consequent "de-skilling" of teachers, the redefinition of their work as the implementation of others' ideas and plans, is among the most obvious, and unbecoming, examples of how democracy has been dissolving in our schools (Apple 1986). Moreover, much of the talk about "site-based management," while appearing to reverse such centralization, actually amounts to little more than localizing struggles over limited resources and accountability for policy and program decisions made in distant places.

Finally, the matter of teachers' control of their own professional work involves not just resources and curriculum mandates, but instructional practices as well. Earlier we described how structural and curricular aspects of the school might be shaped by democratic values, though we also understand that they are also guided by research and other technical knowledge. In democratic schools, such knowledge does not come only from "elite" sources located outside the school, such as academic researchers. Of even more interest is the knowledge that teachers produce for their own use through action research and local dialogue. This does not mean other sources of professional knowledge are invalid or useless; it simply means they are not the only sources of worthwhile ideas.

When we link the democratic right of teachers to exercise meaningful control over their own work with the obligation of teachers and other adults to extend the democratic way of life to young people, we see the real possibility that democratic values might become a source of coherence for life in our schools. To turn the possibility into reality, however, we will again have to come up against some difficult questions. For instance, parents, the community, and the state certainly have a right to say what goals they want for education. But should they have the same say as professional educators in

decisions about such matters as curriculum organization and resources? Does the heavy obligation to democracy that we have asked teachers to carry entitle them to certain professional autonomies beyond community control? What can the stories in this book tell us about such questions?

Building on a Rich Legacy

The picture we have sketched so far seems splendid in theory, but can it be fleshed out given present realities? It is true that the gap between democratic values and school practices is as wide now as it has ever been. But as the stories in this book reveal, the struggle to create democratic schools is alive in many places. The efforts described here are not anomalies of our own times; they are contemporary examples of a long line of work that has stretched over more than a century. As such, they offer a glimpse of the possibilities on the other side of the question that people today are still asking themselves: *How might schools both express and extend the meaning of democracy?*

We will read, for example, of serious efforts to connect the work of the school with the life of the community. Behind the projects described here lie movements that took place fifty and more years ago in places like Baltimore, Maryland, and Pulaski, Wisconsin, and Pasadena, California—places where young people undertook projects to solve serious community problems (see, for example, Anderson and Young 1951). Like today's efforts, those earlier projects were not short-term activities, important as those might be, but sustained efforts to forge substantive links with communities.

We will also read of attempts to create space in the curriculum for the study of large-scale social problems. Here we can look back to some of the progressive schools involved in the famous Eight-Year Study of the 1930s (Aikin 1962) and to the many classroom stories that emerged from the "core" movement in the 1940s and '50s (see, for example, Faunce and Bossing 1951).

And we will look at cooperative learning, which was favored in many of the earlier "core" schools and in the child-centered programs described by Rugg and Shumaker (1928) and the authors of *Life Skills in School and Society* (Rubin 1969). Our stories, like the earlier efforts, are concerned primarily with cooperative learning as a crucial aspect of the democratic way of life, not with the current popular focus of cooperative learning as a specific strategy for academic achievement.

In various ways, each story in this book emphasizes the involvement of young people in curriculum and other kinds of planning. The authors are following a long line of work describing such involvement not simply as a technique for reducing alienation and rebellion in classrooms but as part of a larger commitment to promoting individual and collective efficacy among young people (see, for example, Hopkins 1941; Giles, McCutchen, and Zechiel 1942; Zapf 1959; Waskin and Parrish 1967).

These stories also speak to serious efforts to build upon cultural diversity and to assuage the inequitable conditions surrounding cultural differences. In this regard, we should not forget that African Americans developed textbooks on their own history for segregated schools in the South during the 1930s and '40s. So much of the work in this area stands on the shoulders of W.E.B. Du Bois, who relentlessly fought to elevate the status and expectations of education for blacks—for example, seeing in job-skill training programs the obvious implications for differentiation of labor by race: "The ideals of education, whether men are taught to teach or plow, to weave or to write, must not be allowed to sink into sordid utilitarianism. Education must keep broad ideals before it, and never forget that it is dealing with Souls and not with Dollars" (Du Bois 1902, p. 82). We will hear the same theme resounding in the view of vocational education carried out at the Rindge School.

Nor are the authors here the first to recognize that creating democratic schools is a difficult endeavor when larger currents outside the school seem to be flowing in the opposite direction.]] Rugg and others (1939) spoke to this issue in the midst of social efficiency movements during the industrial revolution. And the authors of the 1952 ASCD Yearbook, *Growing Up in an Anxious Age* (Cunningham

1952), at the height of the McCarthy era, recounted chilling stories of ultraconservative attacks that resonate in our own times.

This brief historical sketch has focused mainly on the legacy of democratic education within schools. We would be remiss, however, if we failed to recognize that such work was (and still is) done in conjunction with efforts outside the schools themselves. For example, much of the impulse toward democratic schools rests on the prolific work of John Dewey, including not only that in education, such as his epic *Democracy and Education* (1916), but the vast array of essays and books on democracy in virtually all aspects of social affairs. A large debt is also owed to people like Elizabeth Harrison and Ella Flagg Young, who fought hard for the rights of children and teachers, and to others like George Counts and Harold Rugg, who advocated for a view of education as part of more widespread democratic social reconstruction.

Similarly, political activists in larger civil rights movements played no small part in democratizing various aspects of schooling. Were it not for their efforts, the schools might still be plagued by legally sanctioned racial segregation and exclusion of people with disabilities. As well, we cannot ignore the efforts of such groups as the American Library Association to protect young people from the restrictive limitations of censorship. While the courts are still confounded by the question of whether the school should be an arena for full democracy or a "limited forum" for democratic rights, it is all too possible to imagine that the question itself might never have reached the courts were it not for the relentless appeals of democratic activists.

Clearly, then, the idea of extending and protecting democracy in schools is not simply a product of our own times. Both the general concept and the specific features we have sketched out have roots in efforts stretching back more than a century. The historian of democratic schools, however, always has to keep two things in mind. First, just as democracy has had multiple meanings in the larger society, so has its interpretation with regard to schools been somewhat ambiguous. Second, democracy is a dynamic concept that requires continuous examination in light of changing times. For these reasons, we are always at risk of being disappointed when one or another historical attempt at democratic schools did not push as far as we would wish or is revealed as a mix of success and contradiction. What is important is that we recognize moments of democratic impulse in the past as a legacy on which to build our own efforts.

Toward Democratic Schools

We have chosen to include in this book four examples of democracy brought to life in schools: Central Park East Secondary School in New York City, the Rindge School of Technical Arts in the Boston area, La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee, and a particular program within Marquette Middle School (now called Georgia O'Keefe Middle School) in Madison, Wisconsin. Each represents the creative response of educators to the realities of poverty, injustice, and dislocation. And all show the rich learning experiences that result from people's determination to make their classrooms centers of democratic practice and to create permeable boundaries between the school and the larger society.

Early on, we made a decision that these stories must be told in the words of the people involved. This is crucial. The feelings of frustration, and sometimes cynicism, that many educators and community members experience are often the result of not hearing each others' stories. Failure seems to make better headlines than hard-won, slow success. The stories presented here are not romantic. They are honest about the possibilities, and difficulties, we face as we move toward more democratic practices.

And let us remember who that "we" is. Democratic schools need to be based on a broad definition of "we," a commitment to building a community that is both of the school and of the society in which the school exists. Taken together, the stories told in this book say something quite important about the realities of democratic school reform. In each case, success required the conscious building of coalitions within the school and between the school and constituencies outside it. In none of the cases

was the impetus generated from the "top." Instead, bottom-up movements—groups of teachers, the community, social activists, and so on—provided the driving force for change. Finally, none of the reforms was driven by a technical, achievement-at-all-costs vision. Instead, each was linked to a broadly defined set of values that was put into practice: enhancing participation at the grass roots and in the school, empowering individuals and groups who had heretofore been largely silenced, creating new ways of linking the real world and real social problems with the school so that the school is integrally connected to the experiences of people in their daily lives.

We shall be honest here. None of the examples included in this book is guaranteed to solve all the many problems schools confront. In fact, given the economic and social crises that continue to beset so many people in this society, schools and classrooms such as these have their work cut out for them, not only educationally but economically as well (see, for example, Kozol 1991). By attempting to create new, more democratic possibilities in our public schools, however, we can relearn what is possible. Make no mistake about it, the stakes are high, as James Mursell (1955, p. 3) pointed out 40 years ago:

> If the schools of a democratic society do not exist for and work for the support and extension of democracy, then they are either socially useless or socially dangerous. At the best they will educate people who will go their way and earn their living indifferent to the obligations of citizenship in particular and of the democratic way of life in general. . . . But quite likely they will educate people to be enemies of democracy—people who will fall prey to demagogues, and who back movements and rally round leaders hostile to the democratic way of life. Such schools are either futile or subversive. They have no legitimate reason for existence.

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Chapter 6. Lessons from Democratic Schools

by Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane

We live in a time when the very meaning of democracy is being radically changed. Rather than referring to ways in which political and institutional life are shaped by equitable, active, widespread, and fully informed participation, democracy is increasingly being defined as unregulated business maneuvers in a free market economy. Applied to schools, this redefinition has given rise to the push for tax credits and vouchers, management by private firms, commercialized media and materials, and abandonment of the broader ideals of public education (Apple 1993). This degradation has extended to the point where a private consulting firm has recommended that "public" be dropped from "public schools" because its similar use in conjunction with housing, libraries, radio, and assistance programs has come to have negative connotations. Such is the power of language manipulation: Social commitments for the common good are now made out to be "public nuisances."

The schools described in this book are part of a larger movement that eschews this redefinition of democracy in education. They are deeply involved in finding practical ways to increase the meaningful participation of everyone involved in the educational experience, including parents, local residents, and especially students themselves. From their experiences, we can see that this goal is attainable through the creation of learning communities within each school and between the school and the larger community (see also Smith 1993).

The curriculum in all of these schools is based on the belief that knowledge comes to life for students and teachers only when it is connected to something that is serious. Rigorous intellectual work is prized, not for the sake of symbolic standards or agreeable publicity, but because of its ability to make a difference in how we understand and act powerfully on the social world in which we live. The implications for a process of assessment dramatically different from the relatively mechanical and reductive standardized procedures used by so many school systems are visible in these pioneering schools as well.

The idea of a thematic curriculum dominates these schools, not simply as an effective methodology that keeps kids happy, but because this approach involves putting knowledge to use in relation to real life problems and issues (Beane 1993). The focus on what is called "unmet community needs" in Rindge, on social and environmental issues at Fratney and Marquette, or on finding answers to "serious questions" at Central Park East is there because knowledge is thought about differently. Rather than being lists of concepts, facts, and skills that students master for standardized achievement tests (and then go on to forget, by and large), knowledge is that which is intimately connected to the communities and biographies of real people. Students learn that knowledge makes a difference in people's lives, including their own.

This view of knowledge can be seen in the emphasis at Rindge on transforming vocational education. Here, vocational education is not simply teaching future workers the flexible job skills supposedly needed for the 21st century, for despite political and educational rhetoric to the contrary, most economic forecasts show that a large proportion of the jobs the modern economy is creating are low-skilled, part-time, and poorly paid (Apple 1989). Vocational education at Rindge is designed as preparation for an enhanced model of active citizenship in which all people are empowered to make important decisions about the institutions in which they live and work—now and in the future. This same understanding can be seen in the emphasis at Marquette, Fratney, and Central Park East on developing curricula that speak to the present concerns and future dreams of the students, teachers, and communities that have so much to gain and lose in these schools.

We do not want to be dewy-eyed romantics here. The authors of these chapters are honest about the challenges they still face: financial cuts, pressure from powerful groups to define school purposes in

terms of business community needs, ultraconservative attacks on programs and materials, the obsession with measuring anything that moves in the classroom, bureaucratic intransigence, and a society that has been told that public schools can't work in creative ways. What is perhaps most impressive about these schools is their remarkable progress in the face of such challenges. There are lessons to be learned here.

One fact that emerges clearly from these accounts is the attention educators give to the "mundane" realities of daily life in schools. These stories remind us that the most powerful meaning of democracy is formed not in glossy political rhetoric, but in the details of everyday lives. In these schools, people take seriously the realities of curriculum development, teaching, assessment, and the lives of students and teachers who must cooperate to make schools actually work. To say that people are committed to such matters may seem a needless restatement of the obvious; after all, the same topics are part of almost any "reform" talk in almost any faculty room. What is striking about these educators, however, is that they refused to allow the difficult financial stringencies we are all under, the often unwieldy bureaucratic regulations of many school systems, and the immense social pressures and demands being placed on schools to get in the way of building educational experiences that make a real difference in the lives of their students. In viewing such conditions as challenges to be dealt with, not excuses for inaction, these educators have shown a quality that more of us should aspire to, the quality of uncommon courage.

These educators have also managed to evoke an education that is both disciplined and caring; they do not provide formulas for students, teachers, or administrators. An education of this sort is the result of hard work by *everyone* involved. From our experience with the educators writing in this book, we know such work is compelling and fulfilling, but almost always exhausting. Yet, as almost any educator knows, we are all exhausted at the end of a day spent dealing with the realities of schools. The people whose voices you have heard here, however, have made a choice: Rather than spending most of their time on administrative tasks, curricula, teaching, and evaluation that are disconnected from their students and from the communities that they serve, rather than continuing to reproduce the conditions that make so many of our most talented teachers and administrators feel frustrated in their day-to-day lives, they have decided to make a break. They have decided to devote their lives as educators to engaging in educational activity organized around democratic social and pedagogic principles in which they strongly believe. In other words, they have chosen to be exhausted as a result of something worthwhile.

Our analysis to this point implies that these chapters, and their authors, describe an important break from "traditional" practice. Well, yes and no. They do stand as articulate statements about what is possible in schools if people are willing to move away from simply echoing the rhetoric of democracy and instead take up the practical tasks involved in building more democratic schools. As we note in Chapter 1, however, these schools and classrooms have not broken away from a tradition; they have found their way back to it. One of the distinct tragedies of today's school reform efforts is that the people involved have almost no knowledge of the long and valued tradition of like-minded efforts. Unfortunately, educators and citizens alike seem to have virtually no collective memory of the many successful attempts at building more democratic schools. The history of progressive school reform documents the fact that thousands of teachers, administrators, community activists, and others spent their entire professional lives trying to build more educationally and socially responsive institutions. We have much to gain by reconnecting with their successes and with how they approached and overcame difficulties. All progressively inclined educators stand on the shoulders of these people, people whose eloquent vision and hard work day in and day out stand as reminders that what the educators in this book are now doing in real schools is a continuation of a long and wide river of democracy. Our tasks as educators are to keep the river flowing on course and to enable all of the children of this nation to participate in this process.

We have presented four descriptions of democratic schools in this book. There are many, many more that could and probably should be shared among us. In our inner cities, in rural areas, and elsewhere, dedicated educators and community members have formed coalitions to take democracy seriously. One of the very real dilemmas educators face is finding out what is going on in school systems throughout this country where progressive schooling is making an impact. Part of the problem is simply time. Our work has become so intensified (Apple 1988, 1993) that not only is it difficult to find time to write about our successes, it is sometimes difficult to find time to even read about what other people are doing to transform their schools. Yet sharing our stories is crucial, as is teaching one another what can be done, what pitfalls to avoid, and what reality is like when the hard work of building more responsive schools finally pays off.

There are many places where educators can turn to tell their stories and to hear what others are doing: groups such as Rethinking Schools in Milwaukee, the Institute for Democracy in Education in Ohio, Educators for Social Responsibility, the National Coalition of Educational Activists, and publications such as *Teaching Tolerance*, *Rethinking Schools*, *Democracy and Education*, and *Equity and Excellence*. These groups and publications provide forums for sharing and hearing that will do much to counter the cynicism and despair that many educators feel when confronted with the daily difficulties of doing their jobs well in these uncertain times.

We include ourselves in the group that wants to learn about what is happening in the schools, because we understand that philosophical statements can find meaning only in the light of the experiences of real schools. We encourage you to tell us about your own experience in establishing programs similar to those described here. We may find, then, that this volume becomes only the first in a series recounting the rise of democratic schools. In this way, we can document that our best hope for countering the arrogant tendencies now being pushed on schools by groups with authoritarian political agendas, by the centralizers, and by the privatizers is to demonstrate that there are public schools that *do* work, and they do so by bringing real democracy to life. Our children's lives and futures are at stake. Let's not wait for others to act.

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