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5

The Situation Made Us Special

BARBARA L. BRODHAGEN

We Sign Our Constitution

The 7th grade classroom was alive with excitement and anticipation, students stretching their necks to try to look out the doorway. "Here he comes," somebody said. Students quickly composed themselves, and all eyes were on the principal as he entered the room. Acting as spokesperson for the class, one student said, "Mr. Principal, you have been asked here today to witness the reading and signing of our classroom constitution." One voice began as 55 others joined in:

We, the class of Rooms 201/202 at Marquette Middle School, in order to form the best class possible, pledge to live by the following statements:

- *We appreciate our individual differences. We recognize that each person is unique.*
- *All individuals will be treated with respect and dignity. There is no room for put-downs in our room.*
- *We will be honest with one another in order to build trust.*
- *We will learn to resolve conflicts, which may involve learning to live with nonresolution.*
- *Each person will truly listen to every other person.*
- *We will cooperate and collaborate with one another.*
- *Learning will be meaningful.*
- *We recognize that people learn in different ways.*

- *Assignments, field trips, hands-on experiences will be varied so that everyone can and will learn. If everyone tries, we ALL will succeed.*
- *Having fun will naturally become part of our experiences.*
- *All individuals will be organized and on time.*
- *We will respect the right to pass (not take a turn).*

We agree to abide by these truths to the best of our abilities, both as unique individuals and as a cooperative and collaborative community.

One young person began to clap, and soon there were cheers and more applause for all of us, and each of us, and what we had done. The principal said some appropriate and encouraging words and left. We were a group of people, young adolescents and adults, who had just publicly stated agreement to all that was in our constitution, and each of us would try to honor its content to the best of our ability.

Few teachers would be willing to step into a classroom and attempt to engage more than four dozen 12- and 13-year-olds in meaningful discussion. We've all read about how unruly large groups of young adolescents can be, and many of us are afraid we would be unable to "keep control" in this setting. But if creating a democratic community is our goal, then every young person must have a chance to be heard, and teachers must be willing to listen. Achieving such a community is what this chapter is about. It is the story of how teachers and students at Marquette Middle School (now known as Georgia O'Keefe Middle School) in Madison, Wisconsin, worked together to create a democratic classroom.

Marquette Middle School has a culturally diverse enrollment of about 600 students, many of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Classes are heterogeneously grouped, and students labeled as needing special education are integrated into all classes. School administrators have supported new teaching innovations.

During the two years from which this story is told, as many as 56 heterogeneously grouped students were assigned to two teachers who had responsibility for math/science and language arts/social studies. They were joined by a special education teacher who had been assigned to work with students labeled "learning disabled." Each semester, a student teacher from the university worked with us as well.

What Brought Me To This

I have been teaching for a long time. For many years, I worked with children identified as having a learning disability. This work gave me the unique opportunity to get into many classrooms in several school districts in Wisconsin and New York. Rarely did I see students in any of those classrooms participate in determining what they were to learn or how they would learn it.

A lot of what happened in those classrooms didn't seem to make sense to students, and teachers rarely tried to connect what students were learning from one class to the next. Students' usual routine was to sit and listen for 45 minutes and then go to the next class and do the same. When young people asked, "Why do we have to learn this?" or "Is this going to be on the test?" or "Do we have to remember this?" I was sometimes not really sure how to answer them. The students, both learning-disabled and not, were frustrated, and so was I.

As a result of these less-than-satisfying experiences as a teacher (as well as some during my own student years), I began talking to colleagues and friends, trying to create another view of school. We talked of designing school experiences that involve students in all aspects of classroom life, including curriculum planning. Curriculum integration, an idea I had almost forgotten, seemed to provide the theoretical framework needed for this endeavor. I recalled my teaching experiences in a self-contained, integrated middle school classroom for the learning-disabled. In that classroom, students planned their learning with me. They taught their hobbies and interests to one another. Those times had slipped away from me.

Integrative curriculum, planning with students, cooperative learning, team teaching—all were part of what I knew would help bring about successful teaching and learning experiences for teachers and students, including students labeled learning-disabled. I explained to our building administrators what I wanted to do, then set out to find someone who would team with me. Mary Ploeser, a math and science teacher, happily accepted my invitation. I was excited to start the school year.

We Create a Community

Teachers did not walk into the classroom on the first day of school and ask students to write a classroom constitution. We and our students

were strangers, representing different neighborhoods, socioeconomic levels, and ethnic backgrounds. The first two days of the school year were filled with the busy work common to most schools: locker assignments, class schedules, school forms, and so on. We had, however, planned some introductory activities. Halfway through the second day, we asked students how they thought all of us might get to know one another and create a real community. This simple question was the first of many invitations for young people to help create a democratic community. Students did not hesitate; ideas poured forth.

The theme for the first two weeks was "Who are we? Who am I?" (a theme selected by the teachers). Students and teachers together decided that a survey to which everyone contributed questions would help us find out more about one another.

The group wanted to know where everyone had come from, so we designed a family history form, and each person went home and recorded all the countries their ancestors had come from. The information from the forms was used to make maps identifying these countries and to compute each country's distance from Madison. Students investigated whether the countries' names had changed by comparing old world maps to new world maps. These young adolescents, each trying to find his or her own identity, wanted to know what their names meant, so off they went to the library to research both first and last names. Teachers did these same activities. After all, we were members of the group too.

To help answer the question "Who am I?" we measured heights, gathered family health and education histories, wrote brief autobiographies (complete with snapshots), and compared individual data to the results of the class survey. We all marked the location of our homes on a local map. Students interviewed one another and made introductions to the entire group.

Students suggested there be rules for the class, both for teachers and for students. If there were to be rules, then those who would have to live by the rules needed to have a say. The group discussed whether these "things" should be called rules, guidelines, or a contract. One student suggested we write a constitution. Teachers led a review on constitutions, and students and teachers made separate lists of ideas that might be included in a class constitution. Both lists were displayed, and teachers and students debated and negotiated whether various requests were legitimate and, if they were, whether they belonged in our constitution. Teachers and students alike had to stand up and explain, provide evi-

dence, or otherwise convince the group why a particular idea or statement was necessary. After reaching consensus, a committee of students and one teacher took the phrases, ideas, and sentences and fashioned them into the constitution quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

The constitution guided us throughout the school year. On numerous occasions, students, more than teachers, called the group's attention to statements made and agreed upon. They did not take the group's efforts lightly.

Other activities helped build community throughout the year. All of us participated in cooperative games, went to the school forest ropes course, had a potluck dinner, invited parents to see projects and hear presentations, shared our successes with other classes, and invited support staff to be part of the activities.

Another idea that initially met with snickers, but ended up being a favorite, was Monday morning "Sharing Time." Any student or students could share something they had done, something that had happened, or something they had heard about. On most Mondays, a time limit was necessary because so many students wanted to participate. We heard about many wonderful experiences and about the many stresses some young people lived under. Sharing Time gave all of us a chance to get to know different sides of people, what they did in their free time, what their family was like, and what they heard on the news. We valued this time and considered it an important part of our democratic community.

From this partial description of the first two weeks of school, you can see that students already had many opportunities to participate in the creation of a community. We listened to all ideas, and by doing so, honored the diversity represented in the classroom: female and male, rich and poor, adult and young adolescent, and people of many ethnic groups.

Our survey had shown us that we didn't agree on everything, but had decided that certain things were important to us all. We shared a sense of who we were, and we had begun to trust one another. We were becoming a community.

We Plan Together

The constitution written jointly by teachers and students stated that "learning will be meaningful." One way we try to assure meaningful learning is to involve students in planning the curriculum.

The purpose of our curriculum is to help young people extend their understanding of themselves and their world. Using a constructivist approach, we ask students to identify questions and concerns they have about self and the world.

Here are some of students' questions about self:

- How did my skin color come about?
- What will happen to me after I die?
- Why was I born who I am and into my family?
- Will my kids follow in my footsteps?
- Why is school so hard for me?
- How do my bodily organs keep going and going?
- How will I know if I am really in love?
- Will I be successful and happy?
- Why am I so short?

And here are some of students' questions about the world:

- Why do some people/groups think they are better?
- How did racism ever start?
- How did religions evolve?
- Is it possible for people to be born with both sex parts?
- Why are some people gay?
- When will gang violence ever stop?
- Why are so many politicians dishonest?
- Will there ever be a President who is not a white man?
- Will there ever be enough for all to survive?
- What would happen if the sun died?
- How was the universe created?
- How can birds fly?
- Will other planets be livable?
- Will the earth become so crowded that some will be sent to space?
- What will people evolve to look like in 100 years?
- Will there ever be a cure for AIDS?
- Why can't teenagers vote?
- How do roller coasters work?
- Why are some kids popular?
- Why do we only hear about the bad stuff?

Students first develop their questions individually and then work in small groups to try to find common or shared questions. Once the whole class has identified these questions, students are asked to find connections between the self and world questions. These connections form themes around which the curriculum is organized. Students have developed such themes as Isms; Outer Space; Time: Past and Present; Mind Boggling; Environment; Death, War, and Violence; and Conflict.

As students consider each theme, they identify activities that respond to the self and world questions included in the theme. A curriculum containing activities suggested by students begins to accommodate individual learning styles, what a person likes to do or is good at. Students know that they need to develop a variety of skills, however. When asked what should happen if the only suggested activity was "to read," students were quick to respond that there has to be a balance; everyone needs to do the basics, "like reading, writing, and math, and all that other stuff we learn in school."

The teacher's role in this process is not the traditional one of always directing the action from the front of the classroom, but rather one of facilitating activities and collaborating with students. We help groups of students hold discussions, model how to ask clarifying questions, suggest ways to phrase questions, listen to be sure that one or two students don't control a group, and offer encouragement and suggestions. We help students hear others' ideas and periodically remind them that each person has a right to an opinion.

Many wonderful things can happen when students and teachers jointly plan the curriculum. Everyone has opportunities to participate in making decisions about what our work will be. Young people see their teachers listening to them and treating them seriously. Respect and trust between students and teachers grow as both observe how actions and words bring the curriculum to life. Early group planning creates a climate of openness for the rest of the year, a large part of which is a curriculum with far fewer "hidden" aspects than a traditional curriculum.

We Have Big Questions and Concerns

It would take many pages to list all the questions students have raised in our classroom. The self and world questions mentioned earlier should be enough to convince anyone that young people have limitless questions

and concerns about themselves and the world. They are curious about almost everything and are trying hard to make sense of life in all its complexities, and to find out who they are and what they want to become. Their serious and thoughtful questions reflect a need to see themselves as members of a variety of groups within numerous cultures, including the dominant culture.

In the search to find answers, the group often went in directions not planned. One question usually led to several new questions, usually along the lines of *Why does it have to be that way?* or *Who says so?* or *Who makes the decisions?* or *Why don't we just change it?* Because democracy, dignity, and diversity were at the center of our classroom, we tried to look at each question and theme through these lenses. If students did not bring up these questions, teachers did. We wanted students to become accustomed to looking at what they studied with a critical eye and to considering as many different viewpoints as possible. For example, an activity in the "Isms" unit was designed to answer several questions about the relative anonymity of women who have invented things or spearheaded important social movements. Students studied women who have made notable contributions toward the improvement of humankind and then tried to locate information about these women in a huge stack of the school's social studies and history textbooks. Students were surprised to find little mention of the women in the textbooks and immediately wanted to know why they had been left out of these chronicles of history.

We talked about who writes textbooks, who owns textbook companies, how society has treated the contributions of women throughout history, and what people could do to hear the complete story. Students were reminded of other work done during the year that also highlighted the prevalent practice of omitting specific groups of people. Students learned that they can use textbooks to answer some questions, but they also learned that they need to consult a variety of sources for complete answers to some questions. Their research experiences showed them that there are sometimes discrepancies in the information presented in resources on the same topic, that "reliable" sources are not always accurate.

Anyone who has worked in a middle school can tell you that adolescents are concerned about fairness and justice in solving the problems of society. They are thinking through their own ideas about morality and going through the sometimes painful process of deciding whether they

will continue to abide by the values "given" to them. We challenged students to think critically about their questions and encouraged them to keep asking tough questions of their teachers, their parents, and even their peers. The depth of young adolescents' questions is surprising even to teachers who work with them every day. We sometimes wonder whether we thought about these "big" questions when we were their age; we know that nobody ever encouraged us to.

When we asked parents to identify their own questions and concerns about themselves and the world as part of an "Open House" presentation, they came up with many of the same questions their children did:

- Where are the dirtiest and cleanest cities? cultures?
- Why aren't there more recycled products?
- Why do we kill so many animals for food?
- How can we create and save jobs and save the animals and the environment?
- What's the status of the space station?
- How much do we spend on outer space?
- Who owns outer space?
- Will racism ever stop?
- Why do people kill each other (not in war)?
- Will there ever be a time when everyone has enough to survive?
- What job will I have? What kind of jobs will there be?
- Will we keep growing in number until we're wiped out?
- Will kids ever be able to vote?

We believe students have the right to try to figure out how things got to be the way they are. There have been times, however, when we've stared at the long lists of questions and activities suggested by students and wondered how we would ever find the strength to teach about some of these overwhelming, real-life issues. During those moments, we remind ourselves of students' intense desire *to know why things are*, and then reaffirm our commitment to helping these kids find the answers.

I know that what happened in our classroom is not common. In many classrooms, questions from students are unwelcome. But we continue to believe that young people have the right to ask questions and the right to know. They have the right to be part of a school that deals with their questions seriously.

Students Are Involved in Developing Their Own Evaluations

"Welcome to the Room 201/202 Museum."

"The museum tour is about to begin. Would you please line up behind your tour guide?" Groups of young people shuffle around, some find seats, others gather papers, and a small group lines up in the front of the room.

"My name is Lisa and I will be your first guide. I will explain to you what a rain forest is and where rain forests are located. Other guides will show and tell you about the products, climate, rainfall, groundwater, soil conditions, and endangered plants and animals of rain forests. You will also hear about indigenous peoples and reasons why the rain forests are in the news. And you will find out some strange but true facts about rain forests."

Looking around the room, visitors see more than a rain forest. A child's plastic swimming pool has been turned into a pond complete with water, grass, tadpoles, and a frog. There is a woodland forest made of branches covered with a variety of leaves and all sorts of stuffed animals: deer, raccoon, birds, and bear. A papier-mache snake slithers in desert sand as a vulture flies overhead. Visitors see groundwater displays, charts, posters, dioramas, and "Do you know?" displays. The room is alive with color.

At various points in the museum, student tour guides discuss different topics. At the front of the room, Jeff is describing the rain forest food chain. He holds up pictures of a poisonous tree frog and a leaf on which there are tiny insects. Then he replaces the picture of the frog with a picture of a toucan and begins to talk about animals and plants on the endangered species list.

At the close of the tour, the rain forest guides ask for questions. Many hands shoot into the air. The guides answer those questions they can and write down those they can't, assuring the group that the museum staff will "get right on it" and find the answers. They thank the group for coming and return to their seats as the next biome's guides move into place.

A lot had to happen before museum tours like this could take place. First, students had to decide what biome they wanted to study. Then the large group, including the teachers, had to determine the requirements to

be met by each small group. Group members had to decide who was going to do what research. Research had to be completed before any construction could begin. Decisions had to be made about where biomes would be built. Maps needed to be drawn, reports written, speeches practiced, and on and on. The guided museum tour was each group's final evaluation for the "Environment" unit. The tour was videotaped by a teacher, the list of requirements checked by the teachers, and the tour evaluated by students.

Students often were involved in creating unit or theme evaluations, which might be a final group project, a presentation, or a written self-evaluation. For instance, students developed a multimedia presentation to teach a different age group about an "ism"; made a collage, book, or box to show what they thought life would be like in the future; completed individual and group requirements for a presentation about a planet in our solar system; and did community service as a part of the "Environment" unit. Teachers were willing to listen and negotiate with students when they presented their ideas about how evaluation might occur, sending students the message that their ideas mattered.

Students completed self-evaluations at the end of themes and marking periods. Teachers and students spent time discussing areas that the evaluation might include, such as quality and quantity of work, what was easy and hard, students' effort and interest, what they liked to do best or least, group versus individual work skills, and so on. After reviewing their "portfolio" of completed work, students wrote about what they thought they had learned. Finally, students wrote goals for the next marking period.

We Can't Believe How Much We've Learned

Every "product" or paper copy of each student's work was collected and kept to provide students a visible record of their work. This "portfolio" served as the basis for students' written self-evaluations. As students went through their papers, we heard time and time again, "I can't believe we did so much work."

Every student had a notebook to use as a processing journal. Near the end of each day, teachers put questions on the board that called for students to reflect on critical learnings or "big" concepts. The written

responses to these questions allowed teachers to check in with every student and get feedback about our teaching. When many students could not answer the questions, we knew we had to provide additional learning experiences.

Teachers met with groups of eight to ten students to discuss the current theme and to consider students' concerns, reactions to activities, or requests for additional teaching or practice. Teachers used this time to bring up critical learnings that students should be mastering, to ask students to explain what they have been doing, and to ask for feedback about a variety of things.

At the end of each theme, teachers and students attempted to list the knowledge and skills students had needed to answer their questions. We realized that this new curriculum approach would prompt someone to ask for documentation of students' learning. What better way for us to gather this information than by asking the group? By middle school, most students are able to use the language of education, so they listed, for example, "read, write, communicate, do research, use math, work with maps, graphs, and tables, use the scientific method, use computers, listen, give reports, and work in groups."

Listing learnings on the board, talking in small processing groups, and having individuals write in a processing journal all helped us know whether students were learning. At times, the group was amazed at how much they had accomplished and learned. By answering their own questions, the young people could see a purpose in learning, for example, how to compute the mean, median, and mode, or how to contact an environmental agency. They had many opportunities to see the connection between the what, how, and why of learning because they were being asked to create knowledge based on their own real work; they were being asked to actively educate themselves.

We wanted students to learn a lot—and to know that they had. We wanted them to be able to reflect on the most recent theme or the entire year and clearly see their many accomplishments. We wanted them to understand that even though they were not studying the separate subjects of the traditional curriculum, they were learning much of what the "education community" said they should learn.

Everyone Works Together

Students worked with one another much of the time. Often we had each student name one person with whom she or he felt able to work; then teachers structured heterogeneous cooperative learning groups. The groups stayed constant throughout an activity and sometimes throughout an entire theme. We tried to change the make-up of groups across the year, however, so that students had opportunities to work with all of their classmates. The strategy must have worked, because our students have told us that in other classes they knew only a few of their classmates, but in our classroom they know everyone.

Our constitution called for collaboration and cooperation. We wanted to eliminate as much competition as possible. The students who had the most difficulty adjusting to a lack of obvious competition were the high-achieving students. Because they were not completing lots of worksheets or individual assignments, but instead were doing individual and group projects, they initially were unsure they were still doing well. After several weeks, however, these students began to see that cooperating with others did not compromise their own academic work. They also realized that the projects and other activities in our curriculum were more challenging and sophisticated than the worksheets they were used to completing.

Students began to see that they could be teachers to each other and did not depend as much on the "official" teachers. After all, the teachers were often trying to answer questions along with the students. By learning together, we were experiencing the creation of knowledge based on our questions. We worked together toward a common goal important to us all, and when a unit was finished, we applauded and cheered in celebration of all completed projects and presentations.

Do You Want to Talk to Our Class?

We frequently invited people from the community to our class to help us try to answer the questions students had raised. Students were always suggesting, "Bring in an expert." It was astounding how many human resources students helped us locate. They knew all sorts of people, and those we called were glad to help out, especially if we mentioned the

name of the student who had made the recommendation. Our presenters were usually surprised at how specific our requests for information were, and many commented on how well prepared the class was for their visit. Some were also surprised at the topics being studied.

We wanted to open students' minds to many career possibilities, so our presenters were almost always asked to talk about the education needed for their present occupation. White-collar professionals, tradespeople, service providers, retired workers, people working in jobs out of the mainstream, and even an AIDS care provider came to speak to us. Our class learned from these people, and they learned from us.

Students Join the Parent-Teacher Conferences

Everything was set. All the student work portfolios were in order, the room was relatively pleasant, the table and chairs were in position, and I was nervous. "Will this really work?" I wondered. "Will these kids really conduct their own parent-student-teacher conferences? Had there been enough preparation? Will parents want to listen to their child?"

I glanced at the clock and knew it was time. My first conference was with Holly, a bright young adolescent who does consistently good work, but doesn't seem to want to participate in large- or small-group discussions.

Holly walked into the room first and came right to the table and sat down. Trailing behind was her mother, who was carrying a younger sibling. I slid Holly's folder toward her, waiting for her to make introductions. "And who is this?" I asked, as I leaned over and touched the sibling's hand. With that, Holly began.

She introduced her mother, her sister, and me and then plunged into discussion of her work. "This is my best work." She took papers out and gave a brief explanation of each. Her mom asked questions and made comments such as "I remember when you were working on this" and "This turned out pretty good." Holly explained that the "best work" papers would be kept at school in a folder that would be sent home at year's end, with all the other best work.

Holly then read her written self-evaluation to her mom. When she had finished, she and her mom started to talk about why Holly didn't want to talk in front of her peers. Her mom admitted that as a teenager she

didn't want to talk in class either. They talked about what was easy and challenging for Holly. They laughed about Holly's admission that doing her homework in front of the television wasn't such a good idea. And they discussed her goals for the next quarter, with mom saying Holly was too hard on herself.

I just sat there, amazed. Holly had said all I would have said, and much more that I never could or should. I simply validated a lot of what they had said. When it was over, the three of us stood, smiling at one another, exchanging looks that seemed to say, "This felt good, let's do it again."

The parent-teacher conferences held in previous years were always somewhat disappointing for us. Students, the critical focus of the conference, usually were not even present. We decided to begin our overhaul of the conferences by asking students how they thought the conferences should be structured. They were quick to point out that the parents or other concerned adults who attended these conferences heard the same things year after year: "Dan could do better if he only would pay attention." "Brian should participate more in class." "Jamie is doing just fine." "Ali doesn't complete her assignments." "Tim talks with his friends too much during class." Students said their parents would come home from the conference and ground them if they had done poorly or hardly talk about the conference at all if it had gone well. They asked if it wouldn't be more beneficial to talk about their good points, since both the student and parent generally already knew what the student should do better.

Together we decided that conferences would focus on what students defined as their best work and also include a review of students' written self-evaluations and goals. "Best work" was a collection of five or six pieces students selected using their own criteria. These might have included a favorite, one that received a good grade, one that was of interest, or one that looked hard; some students chose papers that represented a cross-section of work in writing, math, social studies, or other areas. The remainder of students' work was available for review and would be sent home at the conclusion of the conference.

As you can see from Holly's conference, what really sets these conferences apart is that students direct the action, from making necessary introductions and beginning the conference to wrapping up the discussion at the appropriate time. Students can begin the conference

with a discussion of any of the three sections of the conference folder: (1) the written self-evaluation, (2) the official school report card, or (3) the best work. At some point in the discussion, however, they must describe what they have been studying and show the related work, highlighting their best work. During most conferences, parents ask clarifying questions that prompt students to offer additional information. The written self-evaluation can be read aloud by the student or given to the parent to read. Goals, too, must be discussed.

The teacher enters into the conversation only as needed. We've found that students are quite capable of assessing their strengths and weaknesses; in many cases, we've even had to soften their too-harsh self-evaluations.

For many of these young people and their parents, the conferences are one of the few times they actually discuss the work of the student. Most students can point out what they are good at and what they still need to work on. All the discussion points from the old conference format come out through the self-evaluation and goals discussion, but this new conference format gives students a large measure of control over what and how things are said. Shifting who has the "power" in various situations is an important part of creating a democratic classroom.

We Look Back on Our Experiences

It is now two years since I began working with and in an integrative curriculum where student-teacher planning is a given. I can no longer imagine not involving the learners, no matter their age, in planning their education and running "our" classroom. Each school year, students have clearly demonstrated that they are able and willing to actively participate in planning and designing their own education.

Some students initially said the work of planning the curriculum was too difficult and asked, "Why don't you teachers just do all of it?" We were asking them to become learners who actively participate in all aspects of their education, from planning to evaluation, and most had never been asked to do anything like that before. They were uncomfortable with changing the role of students. The role of teachers changed too. Sometimes teachers were still disseminators of information, but more often we were learners as well as facilitators of learning.

Teachers and students struggled to define and act on these new roles. Deciding when students would participate in decisions and when teachers alone would make decisions was a recurring issue. Students sometimes challenged teachers to explain why students couldn't be part of all decisions. Many times, we had no answer for them. We were still trying to figure out how much power could or should be given to students. All of us were learning firsthand how difficult it can be to put democratic principles into action.

Student-teacher planning of the curriculum was a messy process. There wasn't a neat curriculum guide or textbook to turn to for lessons. Identifying the significant concepts that would tie a theme together took a lot of time, but without this identification, a theme could become a series of "sound bites" that did little to satisfy students' need to learn. And there were many times when teachers had to scramble to find appropriate materials and resources. Fortunately, we had the much-needed planning time to accomplish these tasks.

Colleagues' reactions to our efforts varied greatly. Some thought we were just going into class and doing whatever the students wanted to do. Some wondered if we were teaching anything. Some knew and understood what we were doing, but said they would never try it because they could see how much extra work it requires. Very few asked to talk with us about our work, yet we knew some were talking about it without us being present to explain. The administration didn't put up any roadblocks, but nobody made many overt efforts to invite others to critically consider the nature and substance of our work.

At the time I became involved in this effort, I didn't think about it as trying to create a democratic classroom. I wanted the students to work with teachers in creating an exciting, rich, and meaningful curriculum. I wanted to see and hear for myself that young people can learn and want to learn. I didn't know how the effort would turn out, and I still have many questions, but they concern implementation rather than theory. As I have said, I can't go back.

The teachers involved in this endeavor interviewed former students to learn what they miss the most about our classrooms. They miss having a say in what they learn, being able to study something in depth, working in groups, knowing they can bring up an issue even if it isn't on the agenda, making presentations about what they learned, talking politics, and participating in making decisions about much of the day-to-day life of the classroom.

As part of the interview, we asked the group if they thought the computer had perhaps generated a “special” group rather than the diverse, heterogeneous one it was directed to. After all, our time together had been such a great success in so many ways for nearly everyone involved that the experience seemed almost too good to be true. After some discussion, one student said what we all felt: “. . . We weren’t a special group, but the situation made us special.”

6

Lessons from Democratic Schools

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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