2 Teaching for Democracy's Sake

We teachers are constantly concerned about what might be called "technical matters"—the nitty-gritty of classroom organization, learning activities, lesson plans, and so on. And who can blame us? When the bell rings, the time for speculation is over. Something has to happen. And that something needs direction and organization. Certainly, spontaneous moments occur in classrooms, but only someone completely out of touch with classroom life could think that teachers do not have to plan ahead about a wide range of technical details. What are my students supposed to be learning about? What kinds of resources do I need? What activities could we use? How will particular students react to one or another activity?

Moreover, teachers have reasons for the choices they make. Maybe a certain book looks like it will be interesting. Maybe one activity seems like it will be more engaging than another. Perhaps one way of forming small groups would make them more heterogeneous than another way. Whether it is to make the classroom more exciting or more efficient or more equitable or something else, teachers have reasons for what they choose to do in their classrooms.

What happens if a teacher chooses to teach the democratic way? The philosophical commitment described in Chapter 1 is just the start. What happens when the bell rings? When a teacher wants to teach the democratic way, how does that teacher think about what to actually do in the classroom? These are extremely important questions, because while philosophical discussions may avoid them, once the classroom door closes, they demand full attention. And it is in this moment that the most noble intentions of a teacher may come to a screeching halt.

In this chapter, we will consider some of the possibilities for thinking about how to bring democracy to life in the classroom. The intention here is not to write a complete methods guide or recipe, but to imagine how we might think about what to do. After all, there is no one way to bring democracy to life in a classroom, and factors like local circumstances, teacher confidence and security, and the prior experiences of students have to be taken into account. But there are lots of ideas and examples we might draw on to see the connection between classroom details and the democratic way.

Deciding the Democratic Way

In a democracy, the principle of human dignity insists that people have a say in decisions that affect them and that their say counts for something. For this reason, probably no idea is more widely associated with democratic classrooms than the involvement of young people in making decisions about what and how things are done (Boomer et al. 1992).

The portrait of a democratic community is often that of a group of people in careful deliberation, making decisions together about which issues to take on and how to go about the work of the group. Inspiring as that image may be, it implies a kind of open-ended agenda that is not always available in classrooms. Perhaps the implication of that vision is why so many teachers say

The content needed to teach freedom must include understanding of such great principles of democracy as the worth and integrity of every human being and the right to share in policy making.
Gertrude Noar, 1963

they can't have a democratic classroom. They may feel that there are too many external mandates to allow an open agenda or that young people don't know enough about what is in a course or subject to make decisions about it. In some cases, teachers even begin to feel guilty because they believe that it is unlikely they can ever reach that idealized portrait.

The fact of the matter is that most teachers do not have the luxury of a completely open agenda. They are hired to teach a particular subject or course whose content and resources have often been decided on by some school or district curriculum committee that is in turn responding to pressure from state standards and assessments. And even where there is a good deal of flexibility, teachers often already have favorite themes or topics they like to bring to the classroom, sometimes having refined them over years of use. In either case, they cannot imagine how young people can be involved in planning.

Instead of beginning with the idealized picture or the real and imagined reasons why young people cannot collaborate in making decisions, perhaps we could begin by thinking about areas in which virtually all teachers make classroom curriculum decisions: the selection of activities and resources, the identification of organizing centers for the curriculum, or the ways in which a group's experience might be evaluated. Within each one of these areas, many decisions have to be made. In a democratic classroom, one of the key questions is, Who will decide about such matters? Will the teacher decide? Will the students decide? Or will the teacher and students decide together?

Suppose it's time to start a yearly unit on cultures, in which students are to read books and poems by authors from diverse cultures as preselected by a curriculum committee. There is nothing here preventing the teacher from asking this year's students, "What questions do you have about cultures?" and then using those questions to guide their discussions about the readings or to expand the unit into new topics. Nor is there anything preventing a high school algebra teacher with a predetermined course, content, and textbook from inviting students to suggest how small groups might be used, how evaluation might be handled, or how homework might be scheduled. Certainly in the case of the high school algebra class, students would have had enough experience

in school to know about these things and to have some idea about how they might be arranged.

Many teachers use guided approaches like these, especially one known as K-W-L, originally suggested by Donna Ogle (1986). In this case, students are invited to think about a theme or topic by asking three question: What do we *know* about this? What do we *want* to know? and, later, What did we *learn* and do we still need to learn? In addition to providing an opportunity for student voice and reflection, this and similar approaches help students understand what the theme or topic is about. Jeff Mass, a grade 2–3 teacher, offers an excellent example of how this might happen in Figure 2–1.

A democratic society requires citizens who are skilled in the decision-making process.
National Association for Core Curriculum, 1985

In some cases, teachers do have a large degree of discretion in determining the curriculum. For example, Lin Frederick (Nelson with Frederick 1994) and her first-grade students planned their curriculum together through three interrelated steps:

1. selecting the target theme (the focus for developing the curriculum);
2. establishing guiding questions to serve as the scope and sequence of the thematic unit; and
3. designing the classroom activities (p. 71).

In one case, they decided to do a unit on "Whales." Next they identified guiding questions for the theme and categorized them according to the different subjects they usually had in school: language arts, music, art, mathematics, and so on. Finally, the group created activities to answer their guiding questions and again discussed how these connected to various subject areas. As well as being an excellent illustration of collaborative planning, this case also tells us that it is not just for older students. Little kids can have big ideas, too.

In another case where wide discretion was possible, this one in a middle school, Barbara Brodhagen describes how she and her teaching partner began the year from scratch with no definite plan for the curriculum. After a few weeks of community

Figure 2–1

The Planets Unit

Not only was this unit designed to meet particular standards within the elementary science curriculum, it also served as a vehicle to demonstrate a fundamental inquiry process, a process that is fundamental to the building of a classroom community. The process:

- Ask a question.
- Gather data.
- Tell others about your discoveries.

This simple inquiry process plays out in many complicated ways during the school year. It is applied in a variety of classroom situations, from individual reading projects to small-group art projects and all-class environmental science projects. The process is intended to tap children's natural curiosity about the world around them and to make their curiosity an important part of the methodology of the community. Making children's questions the legitimate business of learning is inherently democratic. It brings background knowledge, both cultural and intellectual, into the learning community. It creates an atmosphere of ownership and authenticity in the learning community.

The Unit: For this particular unit on the planets, I first asked the kids, "What sort of things do you know about the planets?" Each one generated a list privately of all the things they knew about Earth, the moon, the sun, and any other planets in our solar system. After generating their list, they were assigned to small groups to share their knowledge with their classmates, looking for commonalities within their knowledge as well as any facts that were unique and interesting. After the small-group work, information was shared with the entire class. Key facts were written on a large sheet of paper at the front of the room. When the planet information was shared, I modeled questions that could be generated from the information. ("Why do you think there are thirteen rings on this planet and none on this one?") The modeling

was designed to facilitate the generation of student questions and open up possible avenues of research.

After sharing knowledge, I asked, "What do you want to learn about the planets?" Once again, kids wrote privately, then shared their questions with the same small group of classmates, again looking for similarities and differences. Eventually, a group list of *questions* was composed:

What Do You Want to Know?

- What is the temperature on your planet?
- How many moons does your planet have?
- How long is the day (one rotation) on your planet?
- How long is one year (revolution) on your planet?
- What does your planet look like?
- How big is your planet compared to Earth?
- Does your planet have rings?
- Does your planet have storms?
- How far is your planet from the sun?

Children were then assigned a planet. Their charge was to *gather data* on their planet, the second phase of inquiry. Planet groups were constructed ahead of time and were designed to bring together a diverse mix of abilities, knowledge, and cultural backgrounds. For several weeks, kids read books from the library, explored reference books, and searched the Web for answers to the questions generated by the class. All information was kept in a planet folder.

Once all questions had answers, groups had to design a way to *tell others* about their planet, the third phase of the inquiry process. One group made a mobile of their planet. Three planet posters and three dioramas were created. One group wrote and illustrated a small book. Each group presented their planet to the class, answering all the original questions in their presentation.

Extensions: As with most units within our learning community, knowledge generated by the community is extended

Figure 2–1. *Continued*

into other aspects of learning. The inquiry process is a major component of our learning and is repeated in a myriad of forms, lending continuity to otherwise discontinuous events. The facts and information garnered from the planets unit extended into a project with our K–1 classroom buddies. My students were put in the role of teacher, having to design and implement two lessons about the solar system for a K–1 "student." The planets unit also morphed into the children's next creative writing assignment. Kids had to pretend that they were a space traveler visiting a planet of their choice. Information from the planets unit had to be integrated into the writing assignment.

Figure 2–1. *Continued*

building, they took their students through a process she describes this way:

> We begin by asking the students to do some self-reflection: "We would like you to begin by thinking about yourself. Who are you? What are you like? What are your interests, aspirations? Please make a list of words or phrases you would use if asked to tell about yourself."
>
> Next we raise the first of the two major questions: "Still thinking about yourself and looking at the list you have made, now please list questions or concerns you have about yourself. What questions or concerns do you have about yourself?" After sufficient time for the students to list questions individually, we form small groups of five or six people and ask them to search for shared questions which are recorded on newsprint: "Are there questions or concerns that were expressed by several or all members of your group? If so, what are they? No one is required to show their personal list or to share anything from it unless they choose to do so."
>
> Once the group self questions and concerns are recorded, we turn to the second of the two major questions: "Now we would like you to look outside yourself at the world you live in, from the close parts (family, friends, school, cultures, our community, and so on) to the more distant parts (your state, your nation, the global world). We would like you to think about that world—both near and far—and list questions or concerns you have about that world. What questions do you have about the world you live in?" Again, after sufficient time to record individual questions and concerns, the students are placed in their small groups and asked to find shared "world" questions and concerns (with the same right to remain silent).
>
> At this point the classroom walls are covered by newsprint sheets filled with questions like these:

Self Questions

How long will I live?

What will I look like when I am older?

Do other people think I am the way I think I am?

What job will I have?

What would I do if I met an extraterrestrial?

Will I ever go to outer space?

Why do I fight with my brother and sister?

Should I get a tattoo?

Will I be poor and homeless?

Will my family still be there when I am older?

Will my parents accept me as an adult?

Where will I live when I am older?

Will I get married and have children?

Why do I act the way I do?

Why do I have to go to school?

Will I have the same friends when I am older?

Why do I look the way I do?

Will I go to college?

Will I be like my parents?

World Questions

Will we ever live in outer space?

What will happen to the earth in the future?

Why are there so many crimes?

Why do people hate each other?

Why are there so many poor people?

Will racism ever end?

Where does garbage go?

Who will win the next election?

Why are schools the way they are?

Will the rain forests be saved?

Why is there so much prejudice?

What is the purpose of time?

How do you know when something is real?

World Questions *(continued)*

Will there ever be a president who is not a white man?

Are there other planets than the ones we know about?

Who owns outer space?

Will the U.S. ever be out of debt?

Will cures be found for cancer and AIDS?

Will drug dealing stop?

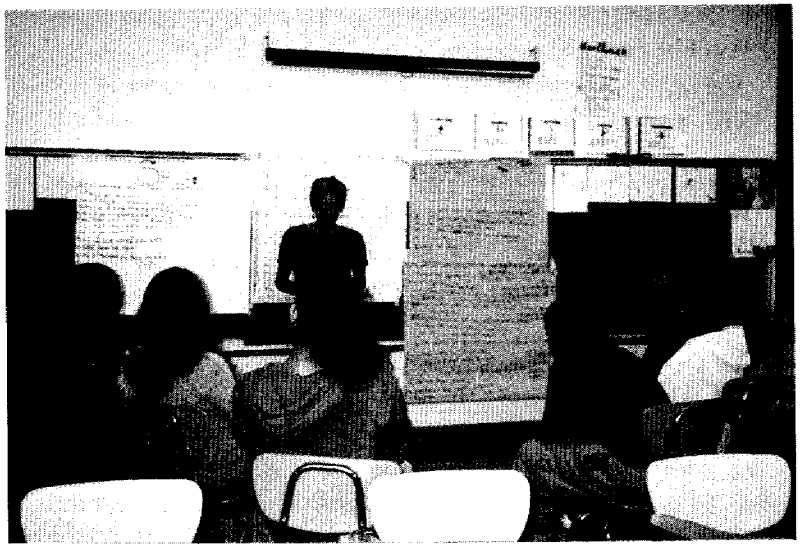
What will people evolve to look like?

Will hoverboards replace skateboards?

Is time travel possible?

How many kinds of species are there?

Next we ask the small groups to look at their self and world questions to identify themes for the curriculum: "Are there any cases where there are connections between self and world questions (such as questions about conflict in school and conflict in the larger world)? If so, what are some words or phrases you might use to make connections (such as "conflict")?" (In groups of 60 or less we have also done this by posting all questions from small groups in a central location and asking the large group to find themes.)



Teaching the democratic way means involving students in planning the curriculum.

Next, the lists of themes from the small groups are posted and the large group reaches consensus on a single list. A vote is then taken to select the first theme for the year (with the rest of the themes to be addressed later). Having selected an opening theme, the small groups are reconvened to identify questions and concerns from their lists that they would include within the first theme: "What are specific self and world questions and concerns we might want to answer within this theme? Be sure to indicate which questions are of interest to all or most of the group and which to one or two since there will be room for both large and small group activities." (For this task we have also used a steering committee with a representative from each small group.)

Finally, we ask the students to identify possible activities the group might do and resources they might use to answer the questions for the theme. To do this we use one of several ways: small groups rotating through stations where one or two questions are posted, large group discussion, or dividing the group in half.

This process completed, the teachers proceed to organize and expand the activities, develop a calendar for activities and projects, and so on. The teachers and students also create a web for the unit as a visual organizer.

Among other things, these examples show that there is no one way to involve young people in making classroom curriculum decisions. The point is to continuously ask, How can students be involved? Sometimes the possibilities may be limited; other times they may be wide open. Teaching the democratic way means involving young people in decision making whenever possible and to whatever degree possible. Giving students a voice in this way, no matter how restricted the teacher may feel by various mandates, is a step in the democratic direction.

A word of caution is needed here, however. I have heard many teachers who have done a bit of collaborative planning with students excitedly say something like, "They decided to do just what I would have planned." This should come as no great surprise. Students are real people, too. They live in the world and they have been to school. If we ask them what questions they have about cultures or how to organize small groups or what questions they have about the world, they are very likely to come up with ideas that look like ours. But the word of caution is this: The purpose of involving students in planning is not to trick them into thinking

that our ideas are theirs or to subtly lead them to the plan we already had in mind. Tricking students or engineering their consent is not consistent with the democratic way. The purpose of involving students in planning is to help them learn the democratic way. Whether their ideas match ours is not the point.

For some teachers, the possibility of involving students in planning simply sounds like too much work. There is no denying that collaborative planning can be difficult and that it involves more complex skills than merely telling students what to do. On the other hand, too many teachers find themselves in a constant struggle with students because there is no mutual understanding of what is supposed to happen or the teacher has guessed wrong about the best way to do things. Worse yet, many teachers find themselves in long meetings trying to figure out with colleagues what might work with students. Why would teachers think that these struggles, meetings, and moments of bad guesswork are less work, let alone less frustrating, than planning up front with their students about how things might happen in their classrooms? More difficult? Perhaps. More complex? Yes. More work? Not in the long run. Collaborative communities are a lot less work than adversarial ones.

For other teachers, the very idea of planning with students seems almost impossible because it means letting go of their complete control of classroom life. Teachers are certainly entitled to such feelings, since most have probably had little preparation for planning with students, and moreover, they are responsible for what happens in their classroom. At the risk of seeming overly harsh, though, I want to ask the question, Whose education are we talking about here? In a democratic society, public participation in making decisions does not depend on whether elected officials feel comfortable with the idea. It is about the rights and responsibilities of citizens and the obligations of elected officials. Likewise in the classroom, the matter of collaborative planning is not really about the feelings of the teacher. True, the teacher must make many decisions alone regarding the safety and well-being of students. But there are still countless matters open to consideration in a classroom. In these matters, collaborative planning is about the right and responsibility of young people to learn the democratic way and the obligation of the teacher to help them do so.

Students who are able to participate in making decisions at school are more committed to decision making and democracy in other contexts.
Alfie Kohn, 1996

So how can a teacher get started in planning with students? First, set aside any feelings of guilt over how little or much seems possible. Second, be honest with students. Tell them what you plan to do and why, and how you hope it will happen. Third, select a way that seems doable.

- Try asking students what questions they have about a theme you feel knowledgeable about.
- Ask them what kinds of activities they have had good experiences with in the past, and use the information to plan activities for an upcoming unit.
- Bring a unit plan you already have to your students. Ask them to look it over and give you suggestions.
- As part of getting to know your students, ask them what questions they have about themselves and the world. Collect these and think about how they might be incorporated into units you plan to do. Or study the questions to identify themes you might use during the year.

Obviously, there are lots of ways to involve students in planning. The way to get started is to pick one and try it out. If it doesn't work, try another. Remember, most young people have never been asked to be involved in classroom planning, so they may be as apprehensive as we are. The first request for their ideas may be met with silence or a remark like, "You're the teacher, you decide." But over time, we can help them find their way just as we will find ours. And that search, in and of itself, is an important part of the democratic way.

Notice, though, that in all of the examples of collaborative planning I cited, none involved simply asking students, "What do you want to do?" or "What are you interested in?" As we will see in the next section, teaching the democratic way is not a matter of whimsical ideas or of doing whatever we are interested in. Democratic communities take on particular kinds of issues and concerns. People may find them interesting and enjoy working on them. But even if they don't, the issues and concerns of democracy must still be addressed.

Content Worth Teaching

In the first chapter, I tried to emphasize that democracy is not simply a process. It is about something. In the same way, democratic classrooms are defined not only by how things are done, but also by the topics, issues, and questions they focus on. Like all teachers, those who choose to teach the democratic way are faced with a myriad of expectations about the content and skills they are supposed to cover. But they constantly seek ways to make space for socially significant topics and themes by explicitly using them to organize the curriculum or by working them into the subjects they are mandated to teach. In so doing, they think about knowledge as more than just cultural ornamentation and more than a collection of facts or skills that their students must have to get through a test or on to the next grade. For these teachers, knowledge is an instrument for understanding and resolving socially significant topics and problems.

Democratizing curriculum and education means, in its broadest sense, connecting learning in the classroom with the use of knowledge in settings near and far.
Ed Mikel, 2000

Here, as in the case of collaborative planning, there may be a wide range of possibilities, depending on the experience of the teacher and the amount of discretionary space in the curriculum. In search of content for math problems, teachers and textbook authors seem most often to turn to simple situations, such as dividing up food among friends, making change from multiple purchases, or finding distances around an imaginary town. Teachers who are thinking about the democratic way are more likely to search for examples having to do with more significant topics, such as trends in local population patterns, distribution of wealth, or effects of different land-use patterns. Where lists of preferred stories and poetry often emphasize classical "musts" or "child favorites," teachers who choose the democratic way are also on the lookout for those that bring to light important contemporary issues and that systematically give voice to views from diverse cultures.

Topics and problems in science are not simply drawn from simulations or exercises in a manual when teachers are thinking about democracy. Instead, they are more likely to involve things such as testing water in the school or community, analyzing the nutritional value and consequences of cafeteria food, identifying pollution sources in the local area, and studying and debating trends in scientific and medical research and funding. Social studies is not merely a chronology of events defined by wars and land acquisition deals populated by military figures and politicians. It is a study of recurring issues and problems like human rights, civil liberties, and economic justice that are struggled over by real people from diverse backgrounds who influence and are influenced by social, political, and cultural forces (Lockwood and Harris 1985). Music and art are not simply areas for clever activity, holiday performance, or high culture appreciation, but opportunities to express hopes and feelings in relation to life's events and struggles.

Thinking about such examples reveals some of the kinds of questions teachers can ask when they choose to teach the democratic way:

- Does the content of a particular subject involve socially significant issues and topics whenever possible?
- How can I use my subject to bring to light important issues or topics?
- Are students aware of my attempts to add social value to a subject?

Teachers who have not thought about these kinds of questions might be surprised to find that taking them seriously not only begins to bring democracy to life, but also helps bring mechanical or abstract content and skills to life. This is becoming increasingly important as teachers are mandated to use standards-based, packaged, and scripted curriculum materials that are sanitized of social issues so as not to inhibit sales in any particular state or community. Examples are not hard to find: popular science programs that include a unit on genetics without mentioning how the proportion of a person's blood from different ethnic backgrounds was historically used for racial profiling and discrimination; or math programs that have students calculate family budgets

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 soul.
John Dewey, 1938

as if every family enjoyed a living wage. Most of these materials may seem like good subject content to the subject specialists who create them, but they are inconsistent with the lived realities of many young people and lacking in any social conscience.

Another way of bringing the content of democracy to the surface is found in classrooms where teachers organize the curriculum around personally and socially significant themes (Beane 1990b, 1997; Daniels and Bizar 1998; Faunce and Bossing 1951). Sometimes identified in collaboration with students and sometimes by the teacher alone, such themes provide opportunities for young people to simultaneously think about themselves and the world around them and to use a variety of content and skills. For example, picture a unit called "Living in the Future" (see Figure 2–2), in which young people do survey research to identify concerns about the future, design inventions to solve environmental problems, examine the accuracy of forecasts that had been made for their own time, and make recommendations to their city planning office for dealing with anticipated future problem areas such as land use, transportation, and housing (Brodhagen, Weilbacher, and Beane 1998). Consider another, entitled "Show Me the Money" (see Figure 2–3), created out of questions young people had about where money came from, how it is distributed, how it is manufactured, how to budget, and how much various occupations pay (Beane, Brodhagen, and Weilbacher 2005). To answer such questions, students engage in a variety of activities, including researching the evolution of barter and money in ancient civilizations; creating budgets for both wealthy and poor families; studying statistical trends on the distribution of wealth; inventing improvements in our economic system; and investigating the economy of countries where their favorite clothes are made, including conditions of sweatshop slavery in those countries. Then imagine the group moving to a new theme entitled "Conflict" that involves questions like: Will there be another world war? Why is there so much prejudice? and Did the Civil War ever end?

Still other teachers prefer to engage young people in a direct approach to democratic living by organizing major portions of the curriculum explicitly around social problems and service learning. Such was the case some years ago when a first-grade teacher in a Midwest school began the year with a field trip to a

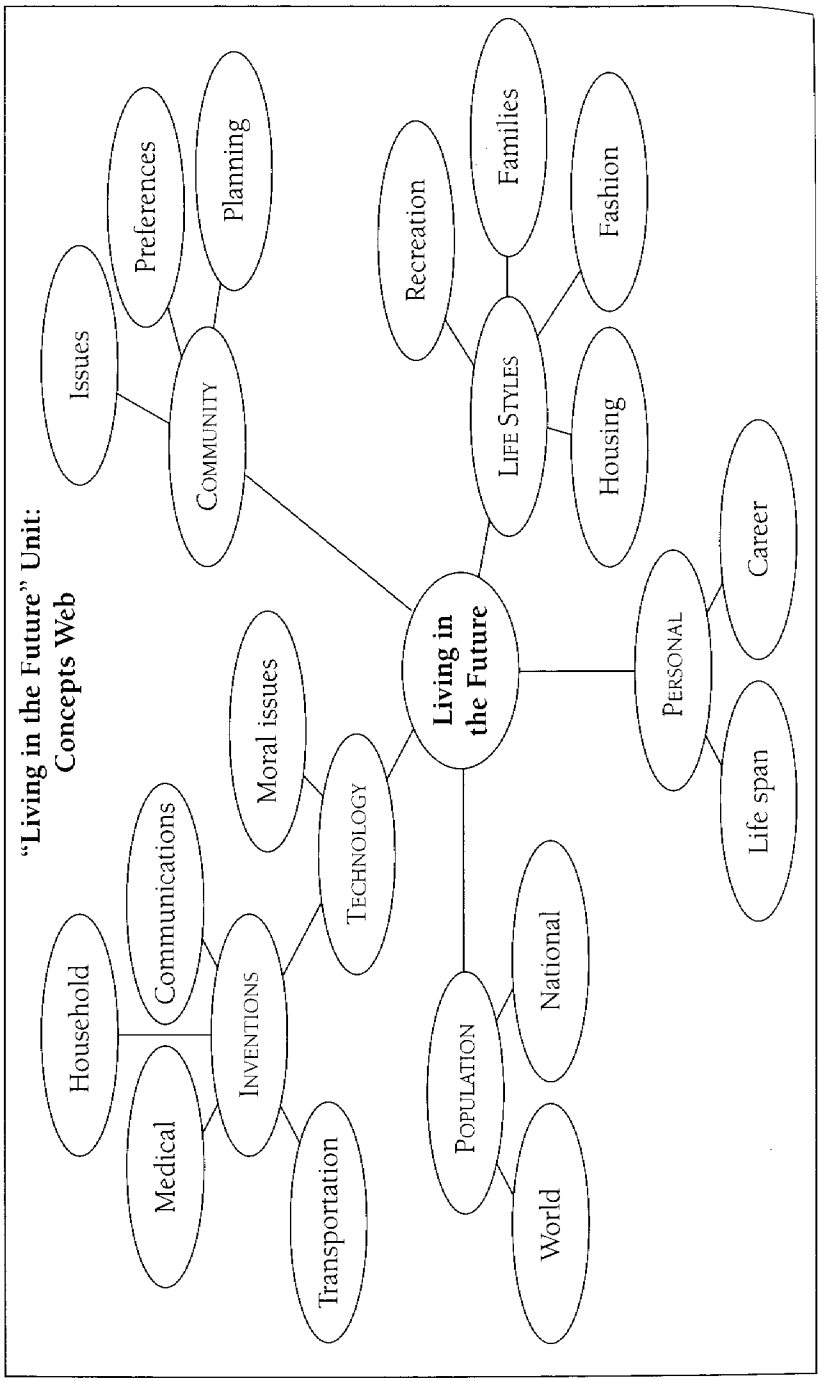


Figure 2–2

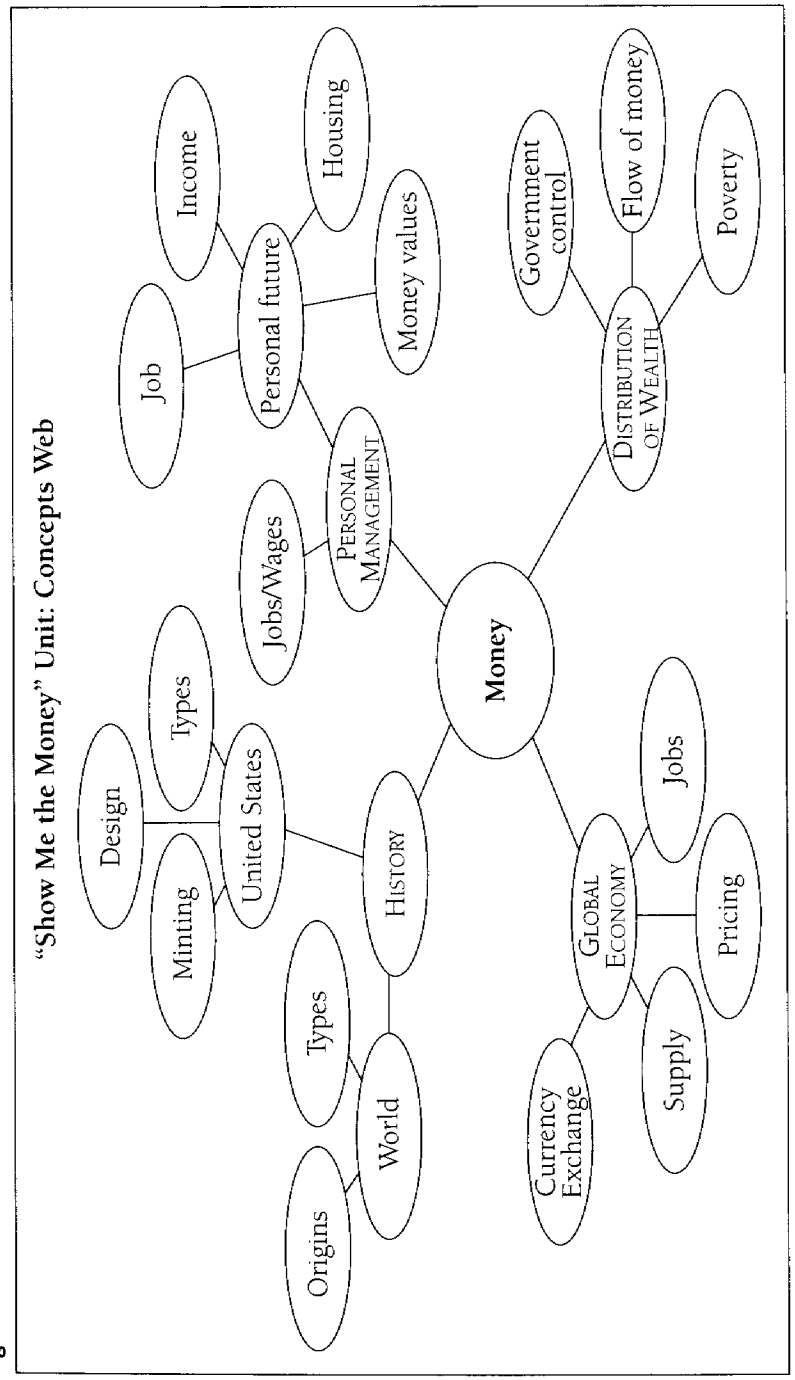


Figure 2–3

local landfill so that the children could see firsthand the effects of unnecessary waste. With that issue in mind, the year was spent creating posters and songs and reading and writing stories about conservation, raising money to plant trees on school grounds, and helping other people in the school learn to recycle. More recently, at a high school in another school district, a teacher and group of students in a computer class used statistical mapping software to show the effects of a grocery store's closing on surrounding neighborhoods. Their data were then used by a neighborhood activist organization to lobby for a new grocery store rather than some other kind of business for that commercial space. In still another example, Grady (2003/2004) describes how students from the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in Massachusetts used data they gathered from peers to study and make recommendations for addressing public health issues among adolescents. In addition to specific ideas for improving public health, the data also serve as a basis for additional work by new groups of students each year.

Teachers at all levels do these kinds of units or projects, and their stories often appear in newspapers and on television news, especially when the social problems are local. Ironically, though, the reports usually portray these experiences as supplemental to some other course work or as fillers when other work is completed. In some cases that is true. But for many of those teachers, this is the curriculum, for social problems are, after all, the content of democratic work.

In addition to using content of social significance, teaching the democratic way demands that content be drawn from more than the usual academic sources (namely, textbooks) or sources that present only one cultural view. In a democracy, the question Whose knowledge is of most worth? is extremely important. The democratic right to have a voice and the related responsibility to hear many voices require that teachers and students draw content not only from the traditional disciplines of knowledge but also from their own personal knowledge, popular culture, and current media. Moreover, they are obligated to seek ideas and viewpoints of diverse cultures.

I am reminded of a teacher I met who claimed to be working in a community that had no diversity, and for that reason he felt he didn't have to use multicultural resources. Of course, he had

confused race with culture, mistakenly believing that since everyone was white, there was only one culture at work in his town. But even if he had been right about that, he was wrong about his obligation to engage students with multicultural views. In fact, the apparent lack of diversity should have inspired him all the more in his search for multicultural resources. The democratic way prizes diversity for the richness and variety of resources and ideas it offers. Critical analysis and debate may end up giving more weight to one view or another, but in a democracy, no one has a monopoly on knowledge and everyone has a right and responsibility to hear diverse views.

I began this section by noting examples of how social issues might be inserted into the content of various subjects. However, many teachers in search of democratic methods have come to the conclusion that teaching the democratic way eventually involves moving beyond the separate-subject approach to curriculum toward approaches that integrate knowledge through problem-centered units (Beane 1997; Nagel 1996). This makes good sense when we understand that no problem of any social significance can be understood or resolved using only one subject. For example, statistics about hunger may help us to understand the scope of this problem. But to really work on the problem of hunger requires getting information about health, doing political analyses of budgets, speaking out at meetings, writing reports, creating artistic displays, and so on. University scholars and scientists understand this, as evidenced by the increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary programs on topics like environmental studies, cultural diversity, and integrated medicine. Knowledge organized for the sake of democracy is not separated into bits and pieces of separate subjects taught as if they had little or nothing to do with one another and memorized for some test. Nor is it drawn only from academic or single-culture sources. Instead, it is pulled together from a variety of sources in an integrated way so that it can be put to use on a significant topic or problem. And in that form it becomes knowledge for the sake of democracy.

Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self awareness.
Paulo Freire, 1970

This idea is not just some theory. Santone (2003/2004) describes how the theme of *Sustainability* can include a wide range of problem-centered projects

from redeveloping local land to investigating global resource issues. In the book *Democratic Schools*, teachers and administrators from several classrooms and schools describe how they bring democracy to life. In every case, the authors mention using problem-centered thematic units to help organize the curriculum in their classrooms and schools (Apple and Beane 1995). Among the themes cited, which are from all levels of schooling, are justice, city works, making a difference on planet Earth, and racism and prejudice (Meier and Schwartz 1995; Rosenstock and Steinberg 1995). This should not be a surprise. A lot of teachers use themes in this curriculum. The difference here is where the themes come from. Some teachers draw themes from existing subjects such as colonial living or metrics. Or they use "processes" change or cycles. Or they use appealing topics such as dinosaurs or inventions. But for those who want to teach the democratic way, the most important source of themes is significant social issues and topics. A closer look at the themes used to organize the curriculum at one of those schools, La Escuela Fratney/Fratney School (2003/2004), makes this point especially clear:

Theme I: We respect ourselves and our world.

Every living thing has needs.

I am somebody important.

We all have a cultural heritage.

We need to live in peace.

TV can be dangerous to our health.

Theme II: We are proud to be bilingual, multicultural learners.

Diversity is a strength in our society.

There are many benefits to being bilingual.

We communicate in many languages and in many ways.

We learn from and teach each other in our Fratney community.

We recognize and respect our multiple languages, cultures, and experiences.

We learn to counteract the stereotypes contained in cartoons, books, magazines, and the media.

Theme III: We can make a difference on planet Earth.

We have been shaped by the past, we shape the future.

African American people have contributed greatly to our nation.

We celebrate the contributions of women.

People of all nationalities have worked for justice and equality.

We need to overcome prejudice and racism.

Theme IV: We share stories of the world.

My family's story is important.

We learn about other people through their stories.

We can all be storytellers and actors.

Other kinds of themes, taken from other sources, might lend themselves to interesting activities and give some context to various skills or facts. But they do not speak to the problems and concerns that occupy the work of democratic communities. Nor do they help young people learn the democratic way.

Doing Things the Democratic Way

Sometimes people talk about the democratic way of life as if it is only about getting together for planning and decision making. In fact, students who first find themselves involved in planning as part of a democratic classroom have been known to ask, "Are we going to do anything this year or just plan?" But democracy is also about doing things and getting things done. The democratic way of living is an active one as people search for informed opinion, analyze situations, express viewpoints, create solutions, offer recommendations, and take direct action. Teaching the democratic way thus involves active classrooms as well as particular kinds of activities.

In democratic communities, people spend a good deal of time and energy becoming well informed about important issues, topics, and problems. In a democratic classroom, we thus might expect to

see young people frequently engaged in researching the questions and concerns they have helped to identify. In an age of communication such as ours, sources of information are increasingly accessible, inside and outside the school, through technology, personal contact, and all kinds of media. Teaching the democratic way means seeking different viewpoints from a variety of sources and helping young people to become increasingly adept as critical consumers of information. In a democratic classroom, teachers and students are interested not only in what is said, but also in who is saying it, why, and by what authority—a scrutiny that may extend from media commercials to textbook authors.

In addition to gathering and critically analyzing information, democracy requires learning how to share it with others. This is why democratic classrooms place a premium on informed discussions and debates as well as presentations and performances. Suppose, for example, the students are considering what they would like their town or city to be like twenty-five years in the future. They might identify important aspects of community life (like land use, transportation, social services, and recreation) and then form small groups around each one to gather information and make recommendations. Rather than stopping there, as might happen in some classrooms, the small-group recommendations would be debated, revised, and voted into an integrated and comprehensive set of recommendations and submitted to town or city authorities.

Because concern for the common good is a hallmark of democratic living, we might also expect to see groups in democratic classrooms involved in various kinds of community service, especially through service learning. According to the National Service Learning Clearinghouse website, service learning "combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content."

Service learning projects not only have a legitimate place in the school program, but they may be initiated from virtually any aspect of it.
Richard Lipka, 1997

Without demeaning short-term acts of charity or kindness, teaching the democratic way involves looking for ways to engage young people in more

complex projects by which they may not only experience a sense of altruism but also learn how to act on problems and concerns. Earlier I mentioned two examples, one in which young children pushed for more recycling in their school and another in which older students used mapping software to show the effects of a grocery store closing. Hundreds more examples have been reported over the years, from designing school playgrounds to conducting community surveys to registering voters to organizing public health campaigns. There is no shortage of examples such as these, but there is a need for both educators and the public to recognize such projects not simply as charity but as part of a larger understanding of teaching and learning the democratic way.

Sometimes those kinds of activities are found in classrooms where the intent is to make learning more engaging or hands-on. Used this way, they are often the center of debate about whether they result in high achievement, enough content coverage, or even too much noise. Sometimes they are criticized because they lead young people to demand action on issues in the school or community. And nothing can chill a classroom more than the administrative admonition, "Don't light any fires we can't put out." But where educators are committed to teaching the democratic way, these criticisms are badly misdirected. Aside from the fact that active learning leads to better academic achievement (see, for example, Marks, Newmann, and Gamoran 1996; Newmann and Associates 1996; Thomas 2000), the central purpose of democracy requires particular kinds of activities not because they are clever or engaging or exciting or fun, but because they are the way of doing things in democratic communities.

With the development of these four, (1) a sense of the personal worth of every human being, (2) the ability to communicate with others, (3) the ability to face and solve problems, (4) self-direction and the ability to work cooperatively with others, comes a fifth and major value, namely, an understanding of the meaning of democracy.
Rosalind Zapf, 1959

One other premium approach in democratic classrooms needs to be mentioned here for both its importance and the controversy surrounding it: having students work together on projects and other activities. What to call this approach these days is not an easy question. The original name, *cooperative learning*, has fallen somewhat out of fashion because it often came to

be associated with academic games more than social learning and because conservative critics thought that it detracted from the individualistic competition they associate with capitalism. For social and political reasons, then, many educators have come to use the term *collaborative learning* instead. Either way, though, it is hard to imagine a democratic community or classroom in which students are not frequently working together. Collaboration and cooperation are icons of democratic life.

Ironically, the use of such groups has fallen into disrepute in many places under the weight of criticisms that they hold back "gifted" children who have to "carry" the group. This sort of reasoning suggests how far our schools have wandered from an understanding of democracy and its role as a central purpose in education. If the purpose of schooling were to teach young people how to compete for personal gain, the critics would surely have a point. But we look to cooperative and collaborative groups not just for their widely documented academic benefits (see, for example, Johnson et al. 1991), but also because they are a critical also aspect of living and learning the democratic way. The dilemmas they pose, such as how to work together and how to deal with those who don't pull their weight, are not reasons to avoid cooperative groups; they are reasons to use them. The response to critics is not so much an argument about achievement as it is a claim for democracy and the obligations of schools in a democratic society. Some years ago, my mother, herself a progressive teacher in the 1930s, expressed surprise that debates over cooperative and heterogeneous groups continued some sixty years after she thought they were settled. Explaining a bit of the current political context, I asked her what she would say to parents who demand to know what their "gifted" children will get out of such groups. Her response was quick: "They learn to lend a hand." Sometimes the obvious answer is the most compelling.

Evaluating the Democratic Way

It is often said that the best way to tell what educators value is to look at what they evaluate. When it comes to teaching the democratic way, however, the question is not only what is evaluated but also how. In thinking about classroom curriculum planning,

we recognized the fundamental idea that people have a right to have a say in decisions that affect them. That same idea applies to designing evaluation. One way of getting started with involving students in designing evaluations is to ask them straight out how they think their own work, the curriculum, the groups' efforts, the teacher's role, or anything else might be evaluated. Should we use a scaled survey, a test, a performance, a discussion, a written narrative, a portfolio?

As a prelude to the larger question, the teacher alone—or with students—might create a list of various types of evaluation methods so as to guide the discussion of which to actually use for a particular situation. Is it undemocratic for the teacher to offer a list of possibilities for the students to consider? Of course not—so long as there really is a difference between them and the students' choice or recommendations will be taken seriously. And depending on the situation, the best choice from a democratic viewpoint might be to use several different methods so that different students might find the one that gives them the best opportunity to show their work or ideas.

Students might also be involved in helping to create any given type of evaluation (Brodhagen 1994). For example, before projects or other work is under way, the group might design rubrics for evaluating them, from the content requirements to the quality of exhibits and presentations. The whole group or a committee might look at the comment sections on report cards to see if the language is clear or if additional or different comments should be included. Also, they might design a format for student-led conferences or project performances.

The principle of student voice also applies to answering the question of who evaluates student work. Obviously, teachers must be involved in evaluating and reporting the work of students. Even if they are reluctant to do so, parents and school authorities insist on it as part of the teacher's responsibilities. But teaching and learning the democratic way means that students must also play a crucial role with regard to their own work. Aside from the right to have a say about how they did, young people also deserve and benefit from opportunities to become more skilled in making judgments about their own efforts. Thus, in democratic classrooms, teachers make every effort to engage students in reflection and

self-evaluation through discussions, conferences, journals, guided self-evaluation forms, and other means. At the end of units or grading periods, students complete self-evaluation activities that are placed in portfolios and shared with parents or guardians. A high premium is placed on student-led conferences in which self-evaluation results and future goals are discussed with teachers and parents or guardians. And where midterm or final report cards are used, two columns of grades or comments are included—one for the teacher and the other for the student. Here again, though, teaching the democratic way means framing these kinds of activities in terms of the right to participate in evaluation rather than as a clever device for forcing students who have not completed their work to publicly admit it.

In our society we grade roads, eggs, and children, and the latter have just as much to say about their grades as the first two.
Richard Lipka

When teachers choose to teach the democratic way, they are also concerned about the work of the large group and that of small groups used for special projects. In this case, arrangements are made for reflective evaluation through discussions, structured response forms, and other means. Here crucial questions are asked about how group work integrates the values associated with the democratic way of doing things. Did group members have equitable opportunities to participate and to have their ideas heard? Were decisions made using some process of thoughtful consensus? Were efforts made to encourage everyone to contribute to discussions and decisions? Did materials and other resources considered by the group reflect a range of viewpoints? Did group leaders, including the teacher, encourage the group to be thoughtful and respectful in collaborative work and communications? Were efforts made to have diversity in small groups? Was ample time allotted for planning, conducting, and evaluating individual and group work?

Using the idea of inquiry, students might also study state standards as well as sample or so-called "released" items from state or district content tests. Doing so opens up opportunities to reflect on how their learning experiences have helped them meet external requirements or prepare for various tests. In a time when such mandates are so heavily weighted, students have a right to this

kind of information. On the other hand, taking such inquiry to a critical level may also help students begin to see how these testing regimes involve undemocratic political interference in their lives and schools.

Many teachers have never had experience with these kinds of democratic evaluation ideas. Here are some ways they might get started.

- Create a form for students to answer questions about how they did on a project.
- Ask students to write a short self-evaluation statement to bring home at midterm, and indicate whether you agree or disagree with the statement.
- Invite students to submit questions for a content test—and then use them.
- Set aside some time at the end of the day or period on Friday to discuss how things went during the week, and again on Monday to preview the new week's plans.
- Ask a small group of students to come up with a rubric for assessing aspects of a project.

And remember, most young people have probably never been asked to participate in evaluation. Like the teacher, they too need opportunities to try things out and to struggle along the way.

Obviously, teaching the democratic way requires us to think about evaluation in ways quite different from those typically used in classrooms. The premium here is on encouraging students to think carefully about their own work, to have a meaningful say in assessing it, to reflect on how democratic values are integrated into group work, and to take the lead in reporting how their work went. Many educators would no doubt say that they would love to do these things if only there was time enough in their already busy classrooms. The fact is that every teacher spends a lot of time doing grades and report cards. The democratic way of evaluating is not so much about time as about a commitment to the idea that young people have a right and responsibility to reflect on their efforts. Instead of asking where we will find the time, we would do better to ask what the consequences are of young people learning to depend entirely on others for judgments about what and how they do. And there is nothing new about this. I recently came across a letter from my own school days fifty years ago explaining

to parents the self-evaluation documents that we did to accompany our report cards. Its reasoning is still relevant today:

> These reports, a cooperative pupil-teacher effort, try to give parents some additional information about the work habits, attitudes and abilities of pupils. Each pupil, in conference with the teacher, attempts to evaluate progress toward a set of goals which each class sets for itself. The process of evaluation is exacting and time consuming. We feel that the effort is worthwhile to the pupil, to the parent, and to the school.

Achievement and Democracy

In the first chapter, I argued for a democracy in which social justice and equity are taken seriously. For this reason, educators who want to teach the democratic way are in a constant search for high achievement for all young people, especially those who are nonprivileged and for whom difficulty in school cannot be offset by family wealth or influence. Importantly, all of the methods and approaches I have already described offer more access to more knowledge for more young people. Along with the democratic classroom policies I will suggest in the next chapter, those in this one are inviting, engaging, in-depth, and comprehensive.

Even so, critics often dismiss these methods as lacking "rigor." They may be right if they mean typical dictionary definitions of *rigor* that use terms like "harsh, "inflexible in opinion," "severe," and "tyrannical." After all, those terms certainly do not hint at democracy. But if we use "rigor" to refer to methods that are intellectually stimulating, involve high expectations, and require in-depth inquiry, the critics would be quite wrong. The methods I have described meet this definition much more than the rote drill, textbook exercises, constant lecturing, and simplistic worksheets forced on young people in too many classrooms. Could the critics possibly want young people to have experiences that match the typical dictionary definition of *rigor*? I hope not, for in those dictionaries, *rigor* is usually immediately preceded by the term *rigamorole*, defined as "a complex and largely meaningless procedure," and then followed immediately by *rigor mortis*.

Teaching the democratic way means pushing for those higher expectations and more rigorous learning experiences. It also

means differentiating instruction, encouraging different learning styles, and otherwise accounting for the diversity among young people. In a democratic society, we should want all young people to experience the best education we have to offer while recognizing that all may not approach or engage with it in the same way. In this sense, accounting for diversity involves variety within a heterogeneous group rather than separate groupings or different curriculum content for different students.

This issue is becoming increasingly important as our most nonprivileged young people are drilled over and over with menial worksheets about bits and pieces of skill and information meant to prepare them for standardized tests. Often this fact of school life, especially in large urban areas, is a result of educators believing that poor children need that kind of "structure" for orderly classroom learning to occur. Sometimes, though, it is the parents of nonprivileged children themselves who insist on using those methods in the belief that they are the only way to get what is necessary to pass standardized tests. And who can blame these parents? When standardized tests carry such high stakes and have historically worked against nonprivileged children, any teaching method that appears to depart even slightly from the teaching of facts and skills would be cause for alarm. Ironically, though, research on teaching methods associated with democratic practices consistently shows that they are associated with success on standardized tests (Beane 1997; Marks, Newmann, and Gamoran 1996; Thomas 2000). Given this, how could it be that teachers using democratic methods do not engage children with the "stuff" that is on standardized tests? Or is it more that when they talk about their classrooms, they emphasize other, higher-level kinds of learning like thinking and problem solving?

The possibility of democratic reform lies with citizens who choose equality as the standard of social progress and the measure of their own empowerment.
Ann Bastian et al., 1986

Meanwhile, the premium ways of learning, like those I have described in this chapter, are left to the good fortune of more privileged young people whose economic and cultural standing alone prepares them for most standardized tests. Why do educators, policy makers, and legislators seem to favor the least effective teaching practices for the least privileged children, even manipulating research to support their views? Why wouldn't they want the best practices for everyone?

Not too long ago, I watched as a young man arrived at a new school after moving from one of the poorest cities in the nation. His teacher in the new school placed a premium on problem solving, hands-on activities, discussion, and other rigorous and engaging methods in a well-organized heterogeneous classroom. Sadly, her new student had no idea what to do in this new situation. Indeed, he had no way of even understanding it, since in all his previous years of school, he had never been in such a setting. His experience was all about drill and worksheets and simplistic activities and trivial content. Where is the equity in that? Where is the justice? What could policy makers and legislators be thinking when they encourage such inequity through their testing programs and unfair funding practices? Why would they allow such undemocratic practices to persist in schools meant to promote democracy? I will give these questions more attention in the last chapter. But we should never leave a discussion of democratic teaching without saying that the press for achievement is part of it. After all, in a democratic society, young people have a right to expect their schools to offer them the best chance for success.

The Teacher's Role

For some educators, picturing a classroom in which students are involved in planning, group work, discussion, self-evaluation, and other democratic practices suggests that the teacher has simply lost all direction and authority. Nothing could be further from the truth. Teaching the democratic way requires tremendous teacher presence and skill as well as a solid understanding about how to prepare for discussions of social issues (Hess 2002).

In a democratic classroom, students and teachers do not simply follow a textbook or prescribed lessons. Their work involves thinking, problem solving, researching, evaluating, and other complex activities. Sophisticated as many young people seem to be, they do not necessarily know how to pose powerful questions, critically examine information, conduct thorough

research, debate an issue, or prepare complete projects. Nor do they necessarily know what the larger society expects them to learn or what issues and problems are prominent outside their own locales. For this reason, the teacher is especially important in a democratic classroom to be certain that crucial questions are raised, persistent problems recognized, an array of sources consulted, and information and skills applied. Moreover, the teacher must be able to integrate externally mandated curriculum standards, no matter how insignificant they may be, into the context of units and activities that involve significant social problems and issues.

At the same time, however, teaching the democratic way means constantly questioning what it means to be democratic in the classroom: When do I intervene? How hard do I press here? Should I say something or let the group figure it out? For questions like these, there in no curriculum package, no prescribed lesson, no script, no certain and final answer. Instead there are only the ever-present questions that challenge the attempt to create a democratic community and curriculum.

It is the teacher's job to help young people think more deeply, more broadly, and more critically. If the teacher were not crucial, we could simply hire people off the streets to teach our children. Where little is expected of students, that may sometimes seem feasible. But teaching the democratic way is not easy, and much is expected of students. Given the importance of democracy and the way it is misused and misunderstood these days, the stakes are high. To meet this challenge, we need very good teachers—and they certainly cannot afford to fade into the classroom background.

At the End of the Day

Educators spend a lot of time looking in the professional mirror, reflecting on what went well and what didn't, why students did or did not do well with some test, why they did or didn't seem to engage with some activity, and on and on. Those committed to teaching the democratic way are no exception. Having explored some of the things they do in the classroom, we can expect that

besides the usual kinds of teaching questions, they ask others that have to do with bringing democracy to life:

- Did my students have an adequate and appropriate voice in classroom planning?
- Was the content we focused on of some social significance?
- Were students involved in rigorous and authentic activity?
- Did we consult a variety of sources and viewpoints in our research?
- Did we critically examine information and viewpoints?
- How could our work extend more often into community service?
- Did we use a variety of ways to reflect on and evaluate our work and our group?
- Did students have an adequate and appropriate say in creating our evaluation?
- Did students have an adequate voice in evaluating their own work?
- Were my expectations high enough, and did I push all students to do well?
- Was there enough variety in activities and materials so that all students had an equitable chance to access the curriculum?
- Did I play out my role as teacher in a democratic way?

More of us ought to ask ourselves these kinds of questions. If we did, perhaps we would also see a lot more examples of teaching the democratic way.

Throughout this chapter, I have described many different ways of teaching the democratic way as well as numerous examples. The chapter ends with a wonderful account of democratic education in which teacher Brian Schultz and his young students took on a real and significant problem in their lives and used it as the organizing center for their work over an extended period of time. It is an example that deserves our undivided attention, first because it brings together many of the very best ideas for democratic teaching and second because their project was carried out in one of the poorest and most neglected neighborhoods in the United States.

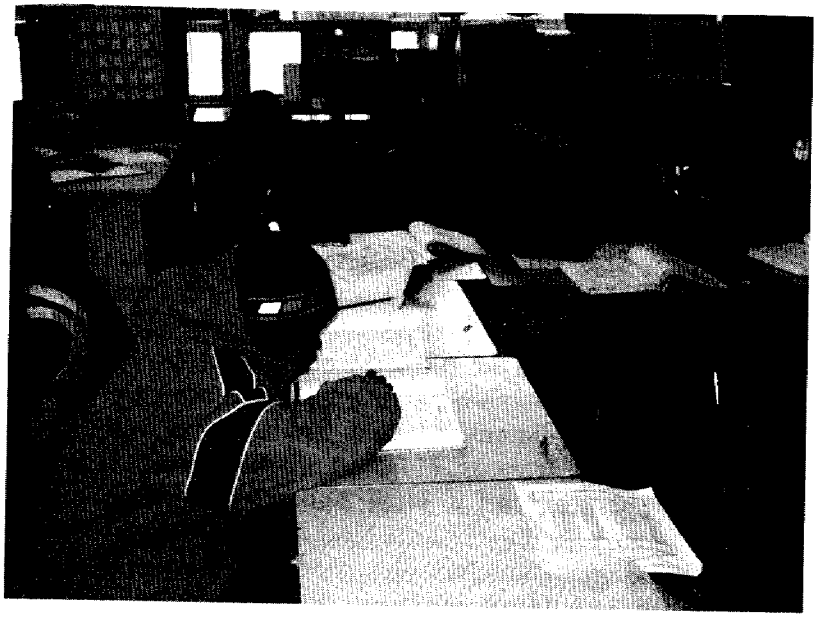
Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way

Brian D. Schultz

The noise level amplified in Room 405. The students were shouting out ideas as I quickly tried to keep up with their growing list. The intensity was beyond measurement as students called out problems that affected them: "teenage pregnancy," "litter in the park," even "stopping Michael Jackson!" A lot of the problems had to do with the school: "foggy windows pocked with bullet holes," "no lunchroom, gym or auditorium," "clogged toilets" and "broken heaters in the classroom." Before it was all said and done, these fifth graders had identified 89 different problems that affected them and their community, a challenge I had posed to them just an hour prior.

As the list grew and I hurriedly marked up the chalkboard with their ideas, some students began arguing with one another that a problem they proposed had already been mentioned. Insightfully, Shaniqua cut through the ensuing debate and stated, "Most of the problems on that list have to do with our school building bein' messed up. Our school is a dump! That's the problem." With this profound analysis there was a sense of affirmation in the room, and the students unanimously agreed the most pressing issue was the poor condition and inadequacy of their school building. The irony confronted me as I looked out at the group of students gathered together on that cold December morning. Most were wearing hats, gloves and coats in the classroom, personifying the real problem they were living. They were very perceptive in citing the numerous problems having to do with the school. These students knew them well; they had lived this injustice their entire school-aged lives.

In short order, these fifth graders listed major problems in need of fixing. In posing the question, I had anticipated the students might decide on simpler tasks like "wanting fruit punch at lunch" or trying to "get recess every day." Instead they went for a more challenging issue, one that had been in the community for years: a new school had been promised but was never built. I wondered to myself, were these students really willing to take this problem head-on? Before I could even ask, they were already coming up with ways they could possibly remedy some of the problems with the school structure and constructing plans to get a new school built. Given the opportunity and challenge to prioritize a problem in their community, the children were not only willing to itemize the issues, but were already strategizing ways to act and make changes. And so this emergent curriculum began.



Our school is not safe, comfortable or a good place to learn because of all these things wrong with it. (Taken from project website)

Framing the Situation

As I teach and learn with my students who reside in Chicago public housing, I continually affirm my notion that the role of the teacher is to provide opportunity and space to students. The teacher ultimately must embrace intelligence and allow students to leverage what they know and what they already can successfully accomplish. As the students develop this essential opportunity, their imagination, interest, and creativity allow

them to create a love for their learning that will endure the travesties and injustices they face both outside and inside the classroom.

In Chicago's Near North side is one of the most infamous housing projects in the country. Notorious for drugs and gangs, and synonymous with failing social programs and Great Society initiatives meant to help low-income citizens, Cabrini Green was first constructed in the early 1940s as temporary housing for a diverse group of poor residents. As time went on, and for a variety of social reasons, the temporary housing concept fell through and the red and white high-density tenement buildings and accompanying row houses became permanent homes for the children and their families. The badly maintained buildings were an eyesore and their mismanagement became symbolic of urban blight and everything wrong with public housing in this country. Now comprised of 99 percent African American families, the residences have become so dilapidated and deteriorated that the housing authority has declared them unlivable.

The Chicago Housing Authority's plan to redevelop the area and make it available for mixed-income families has created a hotbed of controversy as gentrification efforts and the displacement of poor black children and their families occurs. A critical problem with this plan is that instead of making the new development accessible to its current residents, the city and housing authority are uprooting the African American residents out of this high profile, largely sought after land, which sits in the shadows of the luxurious buildings of the affluent Gold Coast neighborhood.

Almost every account I have read about Chicago's poverty-stricken Cabrini Green describes the area as a haven for drugs and murder, gang-banging, misery and mayhem. Even in an article lauding my students' work, the author insisted that "Cabrini Green has all the stuff of which failure is made, and it often delivers door-to-door" (Brady 2004). Much of this portrayal may be accurate, but the story of these people, especially the children is rarely told. Within this community there are young kids with many needs. They require the same or better instruction, dedication, and nurturing as any other student in any other area. In addition, these students are capable citizens

and thinkers with untapped creativity needing the opportunity to demonstrate and practice their intelligences. Darnell said this idea better than I could ever write it: "Even though our neighborhood has problems, we are proud of our neighborhood. This is why we are fighting for a better school. We think everyone should have a good home and a good school. Don't you agree?"

Because of the challenging conditions associated with the Cabrini Green ghetto, coupled with societal issues and constraints, the perennial question of *what is worth knowing* is raised constantly for my students. An understanding of how students from this neighborhood learn is imperative, as they continually adapt in a practical, pragmatic sense. Prior to our time together, they told me, there was little nurturing of the strengths or abilities learned out-of-school, but rather a devaluing of their adaptive and street intelligences. Many could not endure life in the projects without "bein' street smart or learnin' how to survive . . . because there are a lot of people who are gonna test you." At the same time they are seldom recognized in the school setting for their achievements outside of the classroom. If education was measured by the students' successes in their neighborhood via their own lived experiences, many would out-perform their more affluent peers. As I pondered this situation, I wondered how I might best be able to use their adaptability and street savvy in school. Could an emergent, authentic and integrated curriculum that focused on students' interests and concerns be successful in the "traditional" classroom?

Documenting and Reaching Out

We began by documenting the problems in the school by taking photographs and writing expository text about its shortfalls. The students produced compositions that were astonishing. I could not believe the level of sophistication in their writing. When asked how they were able to construct such amazing work on a rough draft, Tyrone responded, "This stuff is really important and I need to get the word out if I want something done." These rough drafts became the starting point, and getting the word out is exactly what they did. Quickly realizing

that their drafts needed to be transformed into persuasive statements, the students compiled their individual work to create a powerful letter that was sent to school board and city officials, newspaper reporters and concerned citizens. In this letter the students documented "the big problems" about their school that were "not fixable" and promptly stated, "We would like to invite you to see our school for yourself. We do not think you would let your kids come to a school that is falling apart." And with this provocative invitation, the stage was set for an adventure none of us will soon forget.

Responses came pouring in immediately. Phone inquires, letters, emails, and visits from legislators as well as newspaper and TV reporters kept the students' project flowing with questions, suggestions, and encouragement. In reaching out beyond the four walls of the classroom, the students became quickly engaged in real-life curricula. As the class made their concerns known, many people offered insight, assistance, donations and the much-needed publicity. Taking into account advice from these outsiders, the students put together a comprehensive action plan that they believed would "help us get our perfect solution . . . a whole new school."

The students' action plan became the epicenter of the entire curriculum for the remainder of the school year. Every subject lost its compartmentalization and became integrated and integral in solving the problem of getting an "equal" school. Reading, writing, arithmetic and social studies were all blended in a natural way. Rather than using basal textbooks the students researched pertinent information about how to solve their problem. Their search took them to texts that went beyond their reading level and aptitude, but they were willing to put forth the effort because it had value to their situation. While reading from Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities,* Chester appropriately remarked, "I think this book was written 'bout us. The author must of come to Byrd school." And Chester's statement was not far from the truth, as Shaquita and Marquis documented, "The restrooms are filthy and dirty. It is really smelly in the bathrooms because the toilets don't flush. As an example of how bad they are, sinks move and water leaks on the floor. The sinks have bugs in them and water leaks everywhere. And we do not even have soap or paper towels.

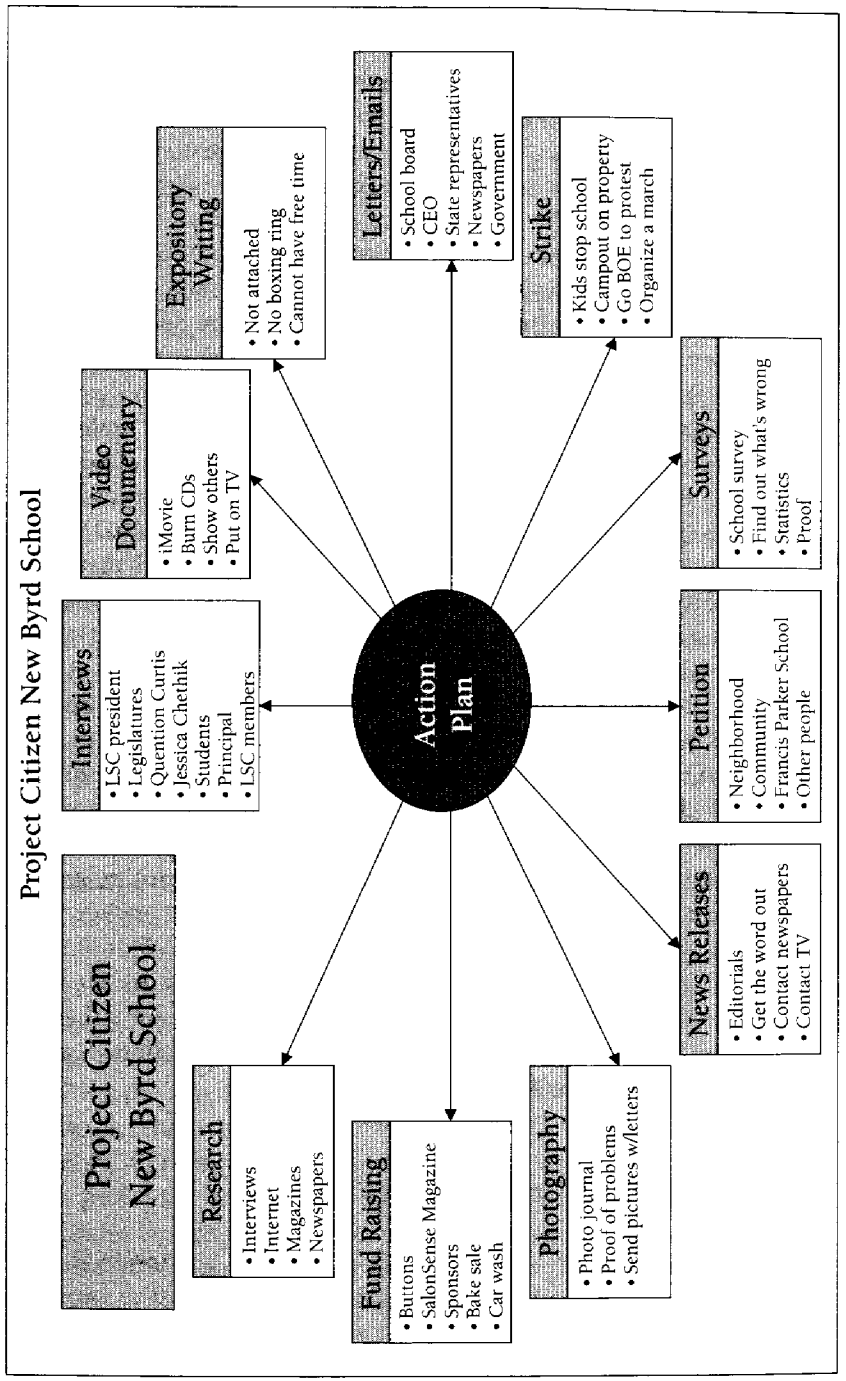


Figure 2–4

Kids don't use it in the bathrooms no more since they are so gross and falling apart."

Reading flowed into current events as students read and reacted to newspaper articles written about their work. In addition they read about techniques for participation, which "showed us how to do things like survey and petition." The students learned how to prepare documentation including their survey results, photos, and written assessments as they incorporated data analysis and mathematics into their student-driven curriculum to gain support. After taking this documentation to the public, Danisha asserted, "No one who saw our folders could disagree with what we were saying about the school's problems." Their willingness and fervor in understanding and making sense of the text went beyond my wildest expectations. The students felt they needed to "get more folks involved and aware" so they developed a website (www.projectcitizen405.com) to "organize all the stuff." This was no small task as they had pictures and writing from visits of politicians and researchers, hundreds of letters and emails written on their behalf, journal entries, petitions, charts, graphs, surveys and analyses.

Room 405 became the headquarters to "make important decisions about who we should bring in to help" and was a think-tank for investigating ways "we can better get others involved." The classroom transformed into a campaign office. The students assumed roles of leadership in their quest and as Kamala commented in his journal, "Being an interviewer . . . makes me feel like a business manager. . . . It makes me feel real important and other kids look up to me. This has never happened to me in school before." The eager students were so involved in the development of their curriculum they often came early and left late and even came in on their days off to "get the job done."

"Reactions Came Rollin'"

Their initiative and perseverance paid off. Although there was some disappointment and frustration in not getting an immediate response from "the decision makers at the board of education and the city," other people certainly responded, hearing

the cries for equity in schooling. From local legislators visiting and lobbying on the students' behalf, to inquiries and case studies of university professors interested in writing about the project, to concerned citizens like Ralph Nader paying visits, the students were applauded and awarded for their fine work. At times, though, I was accused of "being behind this" because, as a Chicago Public School official stated, "There was no way that kids from Byrd school were capable of doing work like this . . . we have gotten too many letters." I may have been guilty of being behind my students, but they were the ones fighting to solve their problem, not me. Such comments were frequently made since many people simply could not believe that these "inner city, black kids" were capable of doing such amazing work. As Crown commented, "We are finally getting on the news for somethin' good!" And this recognition was truly the most important. The students began believing in themselves and understanding their capabilities. As they worked through the issues of their project, they realized they may not get what they were asking for, but the "process was the best part because people listened to us and agreed with us."

The students' efforts did get results. In a classroom that had vastly diverse abilities and aptitudes, students worked at their own pace and took on various roles so as to have the most impact on the outcome of their plans. They were not affected by peers' progress or limitations, but rather sought out opportunities that allowed them to feel comfortable working together while at the same time also stepping out of their individual comfort zones when ready. Prior to engaging in the project, few students valued their learning as typified by many failing to participate in classroom activities, not completing homework, and being frequently absent from school.

Over the many months of the project, the standardized test scores of most students increased over the previous year, several significantly, without direct time spent on test prep. Discipline problems simply did not exist, and attendance was at a sky-high 98 percent. In addition to their high achievement and although they never directly received any response from the decision makers, some of their listed problems within the school were remedied. Items that the school engineer had been asking to have fixed for years were all of a sudden getting the

attention they had lacked. Lights were replaced, doors were fixed, and soap dispensers were even put into the bathrooms!

But, "not satisfied with stupid band-aids," as Reggie put it, the students continued their fight and also continued being recognized. Letters of support kept on coming, a case was established with the U.S. Department of Education, the Illinois State Board of Education invited the students to Springfield, and the Center for Civic Education had the students present at their national convention for Project Citizen. They received numerous awards and "project of the year" designations from the Constitutional Rights Foundation and Northwestern University. Called "young warriors" and compared to "civil rights freedom fighters of the 1960s," they were empowered and uplifted by the response of "people willing to help us that don't even know us."

Now awakened, the young people's intelligence and inspiration, interest and imagination certainly drove their learning. Instead of relying on me to create lesson plans that tailored and contrived different activities, the students had the responsibility to figure out what was most important to solving this problem. They were discovering the most worthwhile knowledge and it was coming from within them. Instead of focusing on memorization and rote learning, the students were naturally meeting standards of excellence because it was necessary for solving the authentic problem at hand. Their action plan forced them to interact with each other and with a system that could potentially help them solve the problem identified. As each student self-selected various roles in order to enact the parts of the plan, their efforts came to life and the public's reaction became more intense. In order to make progress and get the attention they needed, the students' rigor naturally met the standards and objectives expected by the city and state. In fact, their efforts went well beyond any standards or prescriptions because they wanted and needed to learn the skills necessary in order to actively participate in their project.

Looking Back

Frustrated by a hidden curriculum based on social class, I was looking for a compromise that would keep my students motivated and engaged in their learning, while at the same time teaching them the necessary skill-base to progress in school. Challenging the accepted notion of teaching socioeconomic classes differently, I sought the equity in teaching and learning that I so strongly felt my students deserved. My initial wondering led me to revisit the perennial questions with my students: "What knowledge is most worthwhile? Why is it worthwhile? How is it acquired or created?" (Schubert 1986, 1). What would happen if, in Room 405 at Byrd Community Academy, in one of the most perilous housing projects in the country, we took on an experiment of our own? What if the students were given the space to problem-pose, challenge, and deliberate like their counterparts in more affluent schools rather than simply being expected to follow the rules and give the right answers as they usually were? Would the experiment prove to be a disaster, would the children be squashed by the system, or would this curriculum prove successful? Could the teacher and students share authority in the classroom working together in practical and cooperative inquiry? Could the curriculum be driven by student interest to meet situational needs? Would we be able to go beyond following the rules and assert creative ideals? Could we challenge the status quo to make the curriculum of, for and by us? Or as one of the girls in the class asked, "Who's gonna listen to a bunch of black kids from Cabrini Green?" There was only one way to find out.

Using these questions as a framework for a democratic curriculum, and inspired by a Project Citizen workshop (Center for Civic Education), the students embarked on an experience in learning how the government works and ways they might "be active agents in bringing about social change" (Cobb 1991). As I now look back, I remember a conversation with several students in which one, Sharnell, summarized our work in the classroom as a "way to learn how the government works and ways to work the government." By embracing a meaningful problem, the curriculum became a catalyst for authentic, natural, and integrated learning to occur.

Through the project, the students were given the opportunity and responsibility to be active participants in the development and design of their own learning. The comments of Tavon, who was a chronic truant prior to participating in this

Teacher Brian Schultz and part of the Project Citizen 405 group.

classroom resonate strongly: "I did not feel school was a place for me. I didn't think it would help me in my life, but this project made me like coming to school. . . . It did not feel like the boring school I was used to." His turnaround and newfound dedication to schoolwork and attendance demonstrates the power of a democratic classroom where all students are critical members and are allowed to embrace their own ideas of what is worthwhile.

As their teacher, I learned that content can come from the students rather than be driven into them by forcibly preparing concrete objectives in an artificial manner. Just as students in the more affluent schools are encouraged and rewarded for their insight and creativity, these urban, African American students now could have their voices heard through purposeful action and determination. And in this particular case, their voices were no longer silenced.

There are certainly risks involved in trying to solve authentic curriculum problems and create democratic ideals in a classroom. Students are no longer protected by contrived lesson plans and people will cast doubt as to whether students, especially inner city African Americans, are capable of taking on a real problem. Even the school's extremely supportive principal initially had reservations about the lessons they might learn from the project. In a National Public Radio interview he said, "If they don't see things happening, I am afraid that they are going to say, voice all you want, but your voice is a small voice and doesn't matter." Today, though, everyone, including the principal, would argue the lessons that were taken away from the project are immeasurable. Tamika succinctly summed up this idea in a journal entry, "We would love to get our perfect solution of getting a new school built, but we have figured out that great things can happen when you fight for what is right. . . . Even though we are not getting a new school we have done great things . . . like it said in one of the letters supporting us, 'Spectacular things happen along the way!'"

As I write this a year later, I am still in contact with many of my former students. The curriculum the students and I developed together has had a lasting impact on all of us. Opportunities to tell our story continue to emerge. While putting this account together, I thought it was essential and appropriate to involve students in some dialogue about how the piece sounded and to give me feedback about the writing. As I went through the text with one boy, Tywon, I asked him, "Who am I as a white, middle-class teacher to write about you guys?" Tywon looked me directly in the eye and said, "To me you ain't speaking outta turn because you not talkin' bad or nothin' about black people . . . you taking they side and feelin' what they feelin."

This account was prepared with the help of several former Byrd Community Academy students, including Tywon Easter, Manuel Pratt, and Lamarius Brewer.