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We Almost Made It: Looking Back on an Evolving Democratic Classroom

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Looking Back on an Evolving Democratic Classroom

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This is the account of one semester when I began using action research to further the democratic life of my self-contained sixth-grade classroom. In each of the six years I taught that grade, I continued to pursue the democratic ideal; the problem I encountered was not so much with students, but in my role as a teacher hearing echoes from my own working class autobiography. Here, I look at how I first used action research to reinforce an element of democratic education in my teaching practice. How could we better realize a democratic classroom community?

Methodology

Because I identified a problem from my own teaching, I used a responsive action research model with a spiraling cycle of collecting data, analyzing, taking action for change, collecting and reviewing data, and trying a new practice (Schmuck, 2006). The data I collected for analysis consisted of occasional (mostly daily) informal observational journals that I kept over one semester, student comments I recorded, and numerous student and teacher evaluations that I logged. I recorded so many evocative student quotes that I was tempted to let the field notes speak for themselves (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), but the journals were *my own* subjective and selective narrative, needing interpretation (Riessman, 1993). These stories were used to make sense of things (Bruce, 2008). The journal was reflexive; emotional reactions of disappointment, pride, happiness, caring, and anger, all had a place. I had to confront the centrality of myself in my research (Pearce, 2010) in order to sort out what to see in following my students. Repeated readings brought a shaped narrative to the surface. My critical friends, with me as I began a doctoral program, helped me to reflect on the data.

Rationale

I felt my own schooling had been less than democratic, so I wanted my students to be exposed to democracy. I remembered how I had experienced being a public school student, how certain students were regarded as less significant while others seemed more valued. My experience of the dominant paradigm of schooling was one of competition rather than of community (Wolk, 1998). School itself ought to be a moral community exemplifying fairness, caring, and participatory citizenship (Bien & Stern, 1994), but we do not automatically become free and responsible citizens without being educated for citizenship (Carnegie Corporation, 2011). We need to see schools embodying democracy as normative (Levin, 1994).

I shared my dream with my students of a respectful classroom community that would deliberate what and how we study, negotiating as much freedom as practical. I thought students ought to be treated as "real people" (Fickel, 1999), even if they were only 12 years old. I worked at fostering transparency through this process. I thought aloud, defining my role. I believed that schooling should be intentionally invitational (Purkey, 1991), that we should welcome everyone—students, parents, and staff—into this deliberately caring, positive environment (Kalec, 2004).

My own school experiences as a working class kid reminded me of the ambivalence of which Rose (1989) writes, "Education is one culture embracing another… [it can be a] desperate smothering embrace . . . that denies the needs of the other. But also an encouraging, communal embrace, at its best, an invitation, an opening" (p. 225). I faced my own weaknesses. I wanted all my students and their families to feel included, but like my own teachers, I was not particularly successful at initiating and maintaining communication between school and less influential working-class parents. Often, these adults avoided interacting with school personnel; they seldom brought issues to the school board. When they entered the building, I thought they looked ill-at-ease, disinvited. Their children were learning this distrust and powerlessness.

Concerned about classroom management, I followed my hunch that community meetings would build my own confidence and increase students' self efficacy, as well as develop trust and rapport among students and me (Acker, Colter, Marsh, & Sisco, 2003). Here, both citizenship and academic skills are reinforced through democratic problem solving, listening, taking turns, hearing divergent views, practicing oral language, attentiveness, and decision making (Bien & Stern, 1994). I wanted students to develop the skills in working in groups, cooperative learning, and team building.. In this way, perhaps I could help them to master the self control that must accompany democratic freedom. I told my students how optimistic I was that together, the blend of my willingness and their capabilities could truly achieve this kind of student-centered classroom whose members were on task, politely, respectfully, and calmly working together.

I recognized the difference between what Carr (2008) calls "thick" and "thin" democracy. Thick democracy is holistic, inclusive, and deeply participatory, and concerned with pursuing social justice. Thin democracy is about electoral processes and nurturing desirable traits for community life, but these are not "thick" enough for democratic citizenship. What I hoped for was a school that did not just teach *about* democracy, but one which created democratic citizens through shared decision making (Diessner, 1990), enacted through valuing student voice (Arthur & Sawyer, 2009).

Caution

I am a white teacher who practiced in an overwhelmingly white town. I believe my ideals of democratic teaching were not shared by most of my white, middle class teaching peers. The literature on classroom democracy in non-white communities, especially in African American populations, challenges me; my notions can seem simplistic when contrasted with the historical and sociological contexts of racial differences, particularly noted in more authoritarian practices in urban classrooms (Higgins & Moule, 2009), but countered by African American teachers who have centered curriculum on democracy, citizenship, rights, and responsibility to the community (Pang, 2001). Because of my own lower working class childhood, my consciousness of class and

privilege in public schools may have been highly developed. I can claim, however, that my perspective as a child from a relatively powerless socioeconomic class influenced me to valorize what I perceived as the collective despair of non-white and/or working class people, in opposition to what I see as the individualism of the more upwardly mobile (Schutz, 2008).

As I thought about schooling, I questioned whether my practice was serving to produce workers or develop citizens (Peterson and Taylor, 2009). I wanted students to share my vision, but their sometimes puzzled looks indicated an uncertain understanding. Schooling had likely been done to them instead of with them, and so I thought it was important to choose attitudes and words that would convey a different possibility. I especially hoped they would see that above all, we valued each other. Since beginning to teach, I had instigated classroom community meetings where students often advised each other to learn more self control and "treat others as we want to be treated," the overarching principle of our class code.

The Site

Plainview (a pseudonym) was a small Midwest town amidst fields of soybean and corn. The population, 98.1% white, was overwhelmingly Christian, and about 14% low income, many of whom came from two mobile home parks. The less prosperous population did not live in the restored Victorians in the leafier neighborhoods; they might have rented on the several blocks of casually-maintained homes, with two or three of these equaling the square footage of one of the 'McMansions' on the new golf course.

Plainview Junior High School held grades five through eight. The school was a 1960s-model: a flat-roofed, single-story brick building with square classrooms. It was clean and exceptionally well-kept. Graffiti or deliberate defacing of school property was rare. As reflected nationally, the teaching staff was 100% white and about 75% female. There was only a handful of non-white students.

The hierarchy outside of school was replicated inside the classroom. Our most successful leaders were high-achieving students from prominent families. Plainview Junior High, I thought, was populated with at least two cultures. The dominant one valued education and felt welcomed and at home within the school. The other, less affluent and ignored, might have believed they were not present to ask for admission. Both working class and professional parents might be involved, but the children of the successful bankers and business owners were more visible. These students appeared in the weekly newspaper for setting sports records and, less frequently, for academic awards.

It seemed a handful of aggressive teachers set the institutional tone. They controlled the environment; our morale rose and fell based on their collective mood (yet, there were dedicated, kind, and caring teachers fully engaged with their students). Our irregular faculty meetings would drag on: we were preoccupied with chewing gum in the water fountains and cracking down on student discipline; we seldom worked on substantial problems, and rarely, if ever, talked of pedagogy or curriculum.

Hurtful episodes surely reinforced children's negative school histories. Teachers and office staff seemed particularly hard on those children whose parents were not overtly present. I witnessed a teacher frogmarch a fifth-grader to the office. I caught this harangue: "If your mother can't raise you, don't expect me to do it! I raised my own kids; I'm not going to raise someone else's." Another time, the receptionist joked about tardiness with a girl whose parents she knew and liked, then in almost the same breath, excoriated a boy from the trailer park who was also late.

Making Space for Democracy

On the first day of school, some sixth-graders admitted they were getting bored with summer, but most simply looked tired, resigned to the prospect of another school year. The classroom was temporarily uncluttered and organized. The walls were bright with big maps. Believing that this space should be shared with students, I was careful not to overdo my own touch.
All summer, I read, thought, and planned how to improve my practice. Now, in my ninth year of teaching, I resolved to take it more slowly, trying to help students ease more deliberately into a classroom community. From the beginning of the school year, I stressed the community concept. The democratic process was cumbersome and frustrating, but we worked at it. I had developed this idea for several years, zeroing in on the very immediate community that was our classroom. The result was students serving as "community advisers." These students solicited peer feedback about how things were going in the community, then they learned to lead weekly meetings (I adapted this community meeting concept from what I witnessed in one of many low-wage unskilled jobs, this time as an aide in a ward of a mental health treatment center). Problems were discussed; solutions were suggested, voted on, and then enacted. Issues ranged from student cheating to changing unfair school policies. We decided together, mis-stepped, retrenched, and tried again. But I was still too much at the classroom's center. I knew Ira Shor's (1996) work in community college teaching, where he challenged physical and symbolic barriers between teacher and students. I worked at relinquishing control. I put my big desk aside and tried not to occupy it when kids were present.

I worked toward classroom democracy each year. With each term's experience, the concept of classroom meetings led to increased success in giving students ownership in their community, but with limited scope. I still felt dissatisfied. Students saw their rights and responsibilities tied too directly to that one time per week when they met to solve problems. There was not enough carryover into the rest of classroom life. It fell too much on the teacher to maintain community.

I problematized classroom democracy to these sixth-graders. I told them we were going to actively look for ways to make our school experiences more responsive to their needs and wants. I had minimal influence on the life of the rest of the school. Toward the end of each day, the intercom would squawk incessantly. A neighboring teacher griped at how my students overflowed the classroom and clogged up student traffic with their group projects in the halls. I thought these students needed to see proof that they were valued above curriculum and school decorum. Why could we not claim our classroom and its entrance as our territory? Although our classroom could look a mess, I insisted it was in purposeful disarray. It was not unhygienic and it was not solely my space; there were signs of student input everywhere.

Students' responses were encouraging; they acknowledged that our classroom took their needs into account with open-ended projects, group work, and learning self governance. Were we heading in the right direction? Was our classroom emphasizing the maintenance of less exclusive relationships while nurturing individual strengths and personalities?

A Snapshot

In the middle of the floor, 100 pounds of sand had been dumped on a tarp for constructing a pyramid site. In-progress projects overflowed the tables. A life-size student drawing of a sarcophagus hung by one thumbtack. Student-designed games spilled out of the reading corner. Droopy plants begged for drinks. The painted box turtles noisily clunked against the terrarium wall. The clotheslines across the ceiling and every wall boasted student work. Books about mummies lined chalkboard trays. The sole computer scrolled students' messages.

Three students led a community meeting. Someone complained that peers are shirking their part in Social Studies group work. One participant suggested group projects should be restricted to people without late work. Even the students who have these problems admitted this may improve participation. The students wrestled with solutions. We inched along, trying to realize my vision of democratizing the educational journey.

Still, I felt this democracy was pallid, weakly rooted in the thin soil of my practice. I talked with students about how schooling should create good citizens and what that might mean. I felt students were not significantly empowered, because I did not know how to help them participate in really substantial ways. At most, they might vote on what treats to bring to the class party. A few would serve on the school's student council, selling refreshments and sponsoring dances.

I was puzzled that a handful of students seemed to resist democracy. Were they any different from how I had been as a child unused to freedom? They were uncomfortable with the lack of traditional conventions, explicitly asking to sit in rows, to do worksheets, and to use textbooks. Their parents, too, worried that we did not do enough textbook assignments. Some children used their freedom to distract others. Were these dissenters confirming that the task of capitalist schools is teaching people to deny their true interests (Althusser, 1971), and to convince people they deserved their social class fate and to therefore collude in their own domination (Jenkins, 2002)?

That school year, I enrolled in my first doctoral class, Action Research. I found the fellowship and scholarly community I craved. These peers understood teaching to be composed of reasoned, thoughtful choices. We identified dissonances in our practices.

> Journal Entry: September 28
>
> There is a disparity between my philosophy . . . and my actual practice. I like to think I am encouraging a democratic classroom, but I find the reality to be much less than ideal. It is messy. . . more noise than I seem able to tolerate. Some students complain that they can't hear themselves think. Inevitably, there are a number of children more than a little off task . . . not listening to and/or following directions, nor taking ownership of the

> classroom space (not replacing things they have taken out, not helping to tidy up) . . . I end the day feeling dissatisfied, ineffectual, and unsuccessful . . . these feelings stand in the way of just enjoying the students for themselves. . . How can we . . . realize a democratic classroom without getting so near to chaos?

A Class Meeting: What do Students Think a Democratic Classroom is?

Thinking back, although my students could repeat some terms from fifth-grade social studies, their grasp of meanings was uncertain. I asked what our system of government is called, and the guesses were "Republican," "Democrat," and "election." They needed a hint: "The word starts with a 'd.'" Once again someone said "democrat." The word is related, I said; it means those who are governed determine who will lead them and what the laws will be. Finally, [I heard] "democracy," which I wrote on the board. I asked if they have not heard that word before. Some nodded uncertainly; others looked back blankly.

> Journal Entry: September 28 (continued)
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> I tell them . . . what I understand democracy to mean. . . . all people, regardless of color, education, religion, physical condition, age, economic status, nationality, language, or gender have an equal say . . . I ask if . . . we live in a democracy in the United States. Several students . . . blurt out "no!". . . "There are still a lot of people who don't have it so good, like blacks and poor people." "What about women and girls?" someone interjects, "They are still discriminated against." The majority . . . seems to feel we definitely do not live in a democracy. . . I . . . [say] maybe we should think of our country as having the ideal of democracy and that we aren't there yet, but that some of us are working on it.

We went on to explore how our classroom community could operate more like a democracy. I tried to be honest with these students, thinking "out loud" on purpose, ruminating about how we *say* we want to produce good citizens, but wondering what that really means. I shared my definition of a good citizen: someone who knows about what issues affect her, thinks critically about what is best, and then acts based on that belief. I shared how I think schools don't encourage students to determine what happens much beyond planning holiday parties, how adults determine classroom procedures and students rarely impact curriculum.

I Share the Ideal With Students

With input from the critical friends in the Action Research class, I shared my community vision. This is what I described: The noise level during our frequent group work was a pleasant hum. Students were on task, and not due to coercion. Because I was not devoting my energy to control, I circulated among groups, monitoring progress, making suggestions, and asking students to reflect on their work. Students worked in heterogeneous groups, peacefully and fairly solving problems. Keeping student suggestions in mind, assignments were negotiated, tailored to individual needs. Projects were thoughtful, relevant, and creative; some were long term, allowing for deep immersion in curriculum. Students were self-motivated and independent, not looking to the teacher to approve every thought and action.

The classroom belonged not just to the teacher or the students; it was *ours.* Student pride and ownership meant trash was picked up. Student work was prominent. If something was awry, we fixed it. Everyone restocked supplies and straightened shelves. We put things away that we used. We watered plants and tended animals. Students grew as they set goals and took on more responsibility. Freedom expanded as we mastered daily democratic life. Students made more decisions, and discipline and management shifted to everyone.

Reflecting on the Reality

Community meetings were somewhat successful. Students learned to lead as well as participate in them. They solved problems. They could defer conflicts because they knew the issue would be taken up at the weekly meeting, when time and distance have cooled emotions. This is where I think we really were: Some problems brought to the meetings were merely aired with no action. For example, a boy repeatedly claimed that he felt bullied by a core of peers. Some responded, possibly the same students who teased him. "*He is over-sensitive." "He can't take a joke*." When others pointed out we were discounting his complaint, their concern, too, was minimized.

Group work continued to be a major issue. Students said the noise interfered with their concentration. Often, boys railed against working with girls. Was this sexism or mere immaturity? Kids were off task, gabbing about unrelated matters, interfering and bantering with other groups. Groups did projects sloppily or failed to complete them. Students were bewildered when asked for input into curriculum. Peer teachers left important material uncovered.

Certain students responded only to competitive or "fun" activities. If they had a choice, would they do any schoolwork at all? Some did only mediocre work and they did it grudgingly. I aspired to student autonomy, but they clustered around me, the authority, seeking approval, asking questions which they should be able to answer. Most students had grasped the long-established classroom routines, but some seemed oblivious to community procedures. Several did classroom maintenance independently, completed homework, read profusely, while a sizable minority distracted others, managed to look busy, yet did nothing.

When the school day ended, some students were already packed up, tuning out my last minute reminders to check homework assignments. They went through the motions; perhaps they had no intention of doing any of this work. We did our end-of-day housekeeping and a handful actually contributed while others milled around, adding confusion and noise. I knew democracy was supposed to be messy, but this felt more like anarchy.

Taking Steps

I asked students to think of ways to improve our classroom democracy and how we could monitor that improvement. Together, we created a scheme of ratings to quantify how we were doing. We began with just one class period a day. We selected social studies time because that is when we did the most group work. Each of us would evaluate the quality of the period on a scale from zero to five. A *zero* was the lowest score, and a *five* meant perfection. Each period's

average evaluation would be converted into minutes to use for free reading or outside play at the end of the week.

> Journal Entry: October 8
>
> We . . . decided to try this out during the Ancient Egypt simulation . . . Students started out well, but halfway through . . . seemed to forget our goal, and we became . . .'loose' and noisy. At the period's end, we did our evaluations. The average was 2.94, rounded to a 3. We discussed how we had done and if the evaluation was appropriate. Students commented:
>
> > "I felt this score was inflated."
> > "We should do [the evaluation] midway, so we don't forget what we're trying for, and at the end."
> > "We started out well, but we lost our self-control."
>
> I also felt the score was too high; I had evaluated us at a '1.' I thought that was justified since we had . . . such a long discussion about what our problems were.

At the end of the first week, students tallied up nineteen evaluation points. Their assessment scores were usually very close to mine. A week later, we decided to include the last period of the day into our evaluations. Here, also, students' self-ratings reflected mine fairly closely. Now, working on two periods a day, we did not always succeed in self-control; when starting new projects (making Egyptian clothes), the novelty brought on a temporary amnesia about our goals, but the class recovered.

> Journal Entry: October 15
>
> We worked on botanical drawings after going outside to find fresh specimens to observe. They were much more on-task than they were this morning. Why? This seems to be counter to my experience, as I have found afternoons to be far more challenging than mornings.

How are we Doing?

Thinking back, I called a brief meeting to discuss our progress in bringing democracy to the classroom. We discussed our evaluations, and some students thought others were giving marks that were too high or too low. I asked for feedback on how we were doing at democracy:

> "I think about 50% of us get it."
> "We're still too loud."
> "Maybe it's too much freedom."
> "We need more teacher control."
> "Some people are taking advantage."

I asked for suggestions on how we could improve and students ventured that we needed a kind of policeperson, a "noise monitor." Others said they needed a teacher warning when the noise level was getting too high. I asked if they really wanted to have someone whose job it was to tell

them when they were too noisy. Did they think that was the best way to learn self-control? Perhaps I should have videotaped a typical group project, then later asked students to stage a democratic classroom, taped that, and compared the two versions. Would we have seen discrepancies?

I cannot recall any teacher ever soliciting my thoughts as a student about how I felt my about my time in the classroom. Could I have hoped that the mere questioning of our process of working toward democracy was good for the students to experience? I thought they got something of value just by being asked *what they think* and by being led to reflect on the impact of their own behavior.

Moving On

Week by week, we added an additional period to be evaluated. There were frustrations. When we did a loosely structured activity in math, using manipulatives to remind us what multiplication means, I did not prompt them to remember to assess. I would just get the class started on the project and wait to see what happened. It was very chaotic. Students disregarded the lesson's guidelines, misused the cubes, and playfully sabotaged others' results. I jotted down a few questions to discuss later:

> What went wrong?
> What are our perceptions of what was happening?
> Why did this happen?
> What can we learn from this?
>
> Journal Entry: November 4
>
> Students immediately understood why I wanted us to discuss how we are doing . . . What happened yesterday was not at all in line with our goals. I had just taken a shortcut through the computer lab, noticing what a productive atmosphere it was. It was full of eighth-graders and they all looked totally engaged. I described that scene and how I would like to take a few students from our class to witness how impressive it is to see a group of people on-task.
>
> I asked, "What is working here?" Many agreed that we are doing well at our evaluations; they are fairly accurate by now.
>
> I asked, "What hasn't worked?" This elicited many responses about the noise level, on-task time, and the low class average on a recent map test, saying we needed . . . more tests because they weren't taking them seriously enough. They brought up yesterday's math class. They, too, felt it had been a fiasco. I was surprised at how hard they were on themselves:
>
> > "We were just not on-task."
> > "I am embarrassed."
> > "That was our problem. It wasn't yours."
> > "Rewards really aren't what's needed."

"I think you need to be stricter. How about names on the board?"
"You should write letters home to parents."

I thought most of their responses seemed honest, and that they were not merely trying to placate me. But as to their requests for me to crack down as a traditional disciplinarian, . . . the past authoritarian management that had been done *to them* still shaped their expectations of the school experience.

I asked them to write responses to three questions:
1) What do you think happened yesterday?
2) What were *you* doing?
3) What do you suggest as a remedy to improve the situation?

This information was not to be used against anyone, but was an attempt at solving our problems. When I read what they had written, their take on the situation seemed similar to mine. When they wrote about their own part, they were straightforward . . . in admitting if they had contributed to the chaos. Many offered a very practical . . . solution: appoint managers to more effectively distribute manipulatives. Others advised we learn more self-control and "treat others like we want to be treated." One proposed we turn our reading corner into a jail, "like other countries. . . if someone is very bad."

Journal Entry: November 10

It feels like we have almost made it! I still . . . do too much prompting and threatening. I want students to realize they don't need this external structure in order to succeed at this. So much more freedom . . . if only they could see beyond this moment.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

We had a practicum student in our classroom and she was teaching math. She had students in small groups write story problems for other groups to solve. The students got louder and louder and more off task. The lunch bell rang. They bolted for the door as the student teacher tried to squeeze in a follow-up homework assignment. No one appeared to listen. Students would not have acted so impulsively and disrespectfully if I had been teaching, so I intervened. I called students back to their seats, where they sat quietly while the student teacher clarified her instructions.

After lunch, with the practicum teacher gone, I asked the students to reflect on what had happened earlier.

Journal Entry: November 17

We had not shown our best side to our practicum teacher. Students concurred:
"We would never do that to you."
"She might decide she doesn't want to be a teacher."
"She might turn out to be strict and grouchy if she thinks this is how kids act when you're nice."

We then discussed our progress in democratic groupwork:

> "Maybe we need to have a class job that tells people when they're getting too loud."
> "I don't think that would help. They wouldn't listen to someone their own age if they don't listen when a teacher asks them to be quiet."
> "Some people just can't seem to help it. They just get loud. I think it's just immaturity."
> "Mr. Binkley is just too nice. He needs to be stricter, to give out deportment marks [school's discipline system]."

I admitted that at times I start to think that way, too. Meting out strict, immediate punishment after a warning might make classroom life easier for me and the students . . . but . . . I still . . . longed for kids to choose to . . . monitor their own behavior. We talked for a while. Many students contributed, including those who had the most trouble staying on-task.

Students suggest that we hold a community meeting to include the practicum teacher. They feel she should see how we do class meetings, and that it is important to make it clear to her that yesterday's incident does not reflect how much she is liked and how well she is doing as a student teacher.

Journal Entry: November 18

A community meeting . . . student leaders began by reminding the class of what . . . had happened. Several students' comments:

> "I feel I owe an apology to Ms. M. for ignoring her when she was talking."
> "Is there anything we can do to make up for this?"
> "Next time, show more respect."
> "Even if the bell doesn't ring, give full attention."
> "I really like Ms. M. and I think we can get out of hand some days. We'll get used to you and how you teach."

I then asked us to reflect on what we have been working on lately, achieving an understanding of (and a working model of) democracy in our classroom. [I thought I saw] some blank looks, and my heart sank. "What did we decide a democracy is?" I asked tentatively. "A democracy is when people have their own freedom with a little bit of rules," one student answered. This wasn't quite the insightful response I had been dreaming of, but it [was] a start.

We returned to the discussion of how this all fits:

> "Our class is like a community. We work together to make it a good community, not a bad community."
> "Usually when things get exciting, we get way out of hand."
> "But I think we should be more interested in getting taught than in just having fun."
> "We should pay attention."

> "Usually when you have fun, you learn things."
> "It can be hectic, though. My mom's a teacher and she can get a little bit grouchy from a day at school."
> "You know, we could just sit in rows and do worksheets."
>
> The practicum student seemed taken aback by this. I had not discussed this meeting beforehand, nor did we get to process the exchange afterward.

Unfortunately, Ms. M had to leave right away to get to class. Getting her immediate perspective would have made this experience a bit fuller.

Concluding Reflections

Initially, students were excited at the prospect of leading meetings and discussing problems, but their experience was limited. The democratic concept was blurred, unformed. (Interestingly, my own graduate student peers and I had trouble agreeing on a definition. We *knew* what a democratic classroom would look like, but it took us a while to get beyond our vagueness.)

As the first half of the year wore on, I did not always remember to stop to do our collective evaluation. Sometimes, students reminded me. The unpredictability of school life made itself known: snow days, early dismissals, surprise assemblies, fire drills, a parent dropping in unannounced with a birthday cake, Drug Abuse Resistance Education—adding one more "have to" to an already over-burdened schedule. I knew that if this, too, became an obligation, I would soon resent it.

> Journal Entry: November 19
>
> Instead of researching Egyptian myths, we used most of the first two periods to talk about democracy in the classroom. Students' comments indicated that their comprehension of a democratic classroom has developed . . . Some of the quieter students spoke up and all appeared more comfortable at having an open and unforced conversation as a community, not so much as a class raising hands to be recognized by the teacher. I sensed that students had a clearer idea of what we were trying to attain, even though we may be quite a long way from our goal.

As recommended by Vance and Weaver (2002), I always made sure to include two elements in the class meetings: affirmation of successes and time to identify, discuss, and solve problems. In a literature meta-analysis, Bohman (2003) pursues a strong case against punitive classroom management, emphasizing instead that class meetings work more effectively because they reinforce students' social and emotional skills. Our class meetings were weekly, usually on Friday afternoons, but there was always the possibility that a student or I could call a spontaneous meeting to address an immediate issue. Regardless, I felt it was imperative to have students lead the meetings and set most, if not all, of the agendas (Wolk, 1998).

If I were looking to see huge progress in classroom democracy and its components of responsibility, self-control, and critical thinking, I was disappointed. Instead, what I saw was

gradual growth and change in my own practice. My developing consciousness led me to examine my teaching style and the curriculum. Perhaps most importantly, I looked at relationships with students. I asked what kind of classroom I was helping to create. I questioned how just I was to girls and boys with varying abilities and social classes. Did I help students to see beyond cultural limits? What did I learn from my failures?

I am convinced of the worthiness of making democratic life part of the classroom, but I did not do enough to lay the groundwork for students. The briefings I tucked in between the required curriculum were not sufficient. The expectations were too general. I did not always take the class step-by-step through my plans. I believe that these sixth-graders were ready for more intentional, open sharing which would have been more consistent with my goal of co-citizenship.

The students and I grew through this experience. We did not "finish," so we did not arrive anywhere. Their language evolved to using "democracy" and "democratic" in everyday classroom discourse. They showed great awareness of the classroom milieu; when I was sensitive enough to relinquish control, they helped to restore calm. They used subtle peer pressure to curb abuse of freedom.

Teaching is unsettling work that is never completed; because we are always talking about it, thinking, planning, and gathering resources, our practices go on after school, on weekends, and into summer. Introducing democracy to the classroom was stirring another messy variable into the mix. The process can be cumbersome and frustrating to us when students flounder and seem to make little progress in their attempts at democracy; is this because they have had no real experience in it?

How could I have expected my students to "get it?" In some ways, this experiment in classroom democracy was just as difficult for me as a teacher as it sometimes seemed to be for the sixth-graders. I had no background in "thick" democracy. I was always reading and thinking about democratic teaching, but I was also anchored in my lived experience, growing up in a patriarchal family and church, attending traditionally hierarchical schools, and working in a series of minimum-wage, non-union jobs. These "habits" had a strong pull.

Most successfully, I think, students grew both in leadership and in democratic participation in addressing problems in our weekly community meetings. I hope their maturity in handling conflict and analyzing potential solutions will be useful lifetime skills. Among many questions still unanswered are these: Did I help to empower all kinds of students, especially those whose voices were usually not heard? Were those students from the "out group" any more involved than they would have been otherwise? Perhaps most importantly, was this student participation in classroom government, even though limited, a lasting experience to encourage civic life in the greater world?

Experience with democratic classroom meetings (Bohman, 2003) gives students practice with divergent thinking, compromise, and reworking solutions. Ackley, Colter, Marsh, and Sisco (2003) saw that "discouraged" middle school students showed gains in achievement and behavior when their teachers centered democratic meetings in their practices. Further, these students were less likely to see their teachers as adversaries. Students who experience democratic

involvement in schools are more likely to go on to value democracy as vital to a moral life (Levin, 1994). Bohman's (2003) look at the literature reveals that when explicit democratic skills are modeled in classrooms, students carry these with them into all the arenas of life.

I wondered if this noisy and colorful year had any residual meaning to the students who lived it. Did their time in our classroom bring anything more significant than memories of a teacher who was a bit eccentric? In a subsequent piece, I discuss meeting with eight former students for a focus group. At that time, they were a few months from high school graduation. I asked them to reflect on their sixth-grade year to see if they had found it *invitingly* democratic. "What do you think you took away from our year together?" These are some representative comments I recorded:

> "Voice your opinion, question everything, do not be afraid to make mistakes . . . do not pay attention to anyone who judges you wrongly."
>
> "I wonder if we took your class further, if we would take more initiative in the world and make those problems our problems, to feel like we have a say and we have the ability to do more."
>
> "It makes us want to strive to have something like that again. It's like setting a goal for us, trying to make it a more realistic thing, instead of unrealistic."
>
> "People wait for problems to come to them. I'm guilty of that. I won't say anything unless it directly affects me. If we wait for problems to come to us, no one's ever going to say anything. We'll never have the courage to say anything and maybe—people kind of shy away from this—but plunging into the issue. Too many people are silent."

Perhaps these students were trying to say what they thought I wanted to hear, but I believed I could still trust their honesty. They seemed to acknowledge that their time in sixth grade was unique because they were asked to solve community problems together. Despite our shortcomings, we moved, however falteringly, toward understanding classroom democracy.

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