





Democratic Education as Expressed in Practice: An Integrative Literature Review

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Abstract

Despite a strong theoretical foundation, teachers' pedagogical practices that represent the principles of democratic educational theory are not holistically understood. This qualitative integrative literature review provides a more complete view of the practices used by those who define themselves as democratic educators. By analyzing and integrating existing literature on classroom practice this review discusses four pedagogical approaches that engage democratic educational practices including inquiry, artistic, oral, and student-centered methods.

Keywords: *democratic education, classroom practice, theory application*

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Introduction

When a teacher steps into a classroom, they bring a range of beliefs and structural philosophies that impact their practice. This connection between belief and practice has been well documented, and research makes it clear that what a teacher believes about teaching and learning directly impacts practice (Dogan et al., 2020; Northcote, 2010). Beliefs serve to structure how one designs a classroom environment, the pedagogies that are applied in the classroom, how classroom management strategies are implemented, and how evaluations are done (Aslan, 2022).

One can often see what an educator's core values and beliefs are by observing their practice. For example, a teacher who claims a behaviorist philosophy will likely select pedagogies and content approaches that align with their interpretation of that belief expression. When using the behaviorist philosophy, teachers might use reward structures, or they might determine ways to control environmental stimuli to direct behavior. On the other hand, a constructivist philosophy will likely lead teachers to choose a different set of approaches, such as building in student choice and opportunities for inquiry (Bektas, 2022; Levin & Wadman, 2005).

However, there are some educational philosophies where these connections between belief and practice are not as directly understood. We suggest that one of these is the theory of democratic education. In the United States, for over a century, there have been many theorists who have articulated the distinctive role that schooling plays within democratic societies. In the range of theoretical expressions of democratic education from John Dewey (1916), Maxine Greene (1995), Nell Noddings (2013), and John Goodlad et al. (2004), we find the groundings for significant applications that express teaching practice. Despite this strong theoretical **foundation, teachers'** pedagogical activities, choices, and considerations that represent the principles of democratic education are not as holistically understood (Collins et al., 2019).

The purpose of this review is to provide a view of the practices used by those who define themselves as democratic educators. The intent is to analyze and integrate existing literature to provide knowledge surrounding what pedagogical approaches may be connected to democratic educational practice. We ask: As a democratic educator, what is the connection between theory and practice? What unifying characteristics do potential democratic educational practices exhibit? This integrative literature review provides one answer to these questions. By collecting literature that provided evidence of classroom practice in which educators express a democratic identity, we intend to articulate a vision of a democratic teacher in the classroom.

Through this review, we join with a century of theory in articulating that public schooling plays a very unique role **in democratic societies. In today's environment, political and social forces are impacting this relationship.** The rise in laws banning the teaching of certain topics, changes to federal laws including those relating to sex discrimination and race-conscious admissions, and increased parental control over reading lists and libraries indicate a complex interaction between democratic society and education (Langreo, 2023).

As teachers navigate the challenges in understanding how their democratic views are expressed in practice, this review can help us discover possible ways teachers might use democratic theory to engage with social change in positive ways. We believe that this review provides needed insight into how democratic educational philosophies translate into practice, which can then provide a foundation for further research to help us empower teachers as democratic educators.

Literature Review

The first educator to provide a philosophy of education within a democracy was John Dewey. His seminal work, *Democracy and Education* (1916), outlined many of these beliefs, but many of his ideas are also covered in a range of his other extensive writings (Dewey, 1977). Dewey (1916, 1977) believed democracy goes well beyond the functions of government; it is a model for community living.

Schooling provides the structure for individuals to cultivate the skills necessary to participate in a democratic life. Dewey contended that democratic education helps students build social and emotional skills that are necessary to actively engage and build communities. In his work, Dewey articulated a clear purpose for education in a democracy, but his theorizing offered few real practical applications.

Another democratic theorist, Maxine Greene (1995) expanded on Dewey's ideas. She writes that education within a democratic context compels us to act within our communities in ways that help solve problems, limit

human suffering, and make life more socially just. In her theorizing, Nel Noddings (2013) also embraced the power of democratic education for social justice. She views democratic education as a way for us to develop graduates who have a social conscience that helps them think critically about global problems so that they are willing to make commitments to discover solutions for these issues (Noddings, 2013). Yet another democratic educational theorist, De Groot (2018) noted:

For democracies to thrive, civic education needs to spur engagement of young citizens with the quality of the democratic political system, culture, and ethos. This means that civic education needs to provide students with the opportunity to empower themselves, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually in light of (inter) personal civic and political challenges of our time and to learn to contribute to a **more “just, enlightened, and humane democracy.”** (p. 450)

Democratic educational theory espouses high ideals that suggest schooling can help students build the skills necessary to be strong citizens, and theorists have worked to make applications of the theory more concrete to achieve these ideals. For example, John Goodlad et al. (2004) developed the agenda for education in a democracy. This agenda outlined the circumstances and responsibilities that schools have to address as part of their responsibility for sustaining democratic systems. These **conditions are (1) to provide “access to knowledge for all children and youths;” (2) to practice “pedagogical nurturing with respect to the art and science of teaching;” and (3) to ensure “responsible stewardship of the schools”** (Goodlad et al., 2004, pp. 29–32). The agenda suggested that these practices are critical parts of education in a democracy, but they failed to offer much information on what exactly this practice entails.

Mursell (1955) provided another vision of the exact aspects of education that are connected to democratic educational theory. Mursell (1955) articulated 10 principles that he believes, when correctly applied, can impact the organization and management of education. Amongst these principles, Mursell indicated that democratic education **should provide a “curriculum [that] must be oriented and organized for the purpose of helping learners to develop the ability to deal with the daily practical problems they meet in living in a democratic society”** (Mursell, 1955, pp. v–vii). He noted that democratic education also should facilitate **student’s ability to grasp meanings. Teachers should actively engage with educational policies and then put these principles into operation** (Mursell, 1955). Each of Mursell’s principles expressed an understanding that democratic theory should translate into practice, but again this approach also provided little understanding of how a democratic educator might act in a classroom.

The many articulations of democratic theory offer a unique view of education and show that enacting such a philosophy can impact the way teachers practice in positive ways. However, as Collins et al. (2019) noted, **“educators generally know the what and the why of democratic education; nevertheless, the how seems to be underrepresented in classroom practice”** (p. 2). Collins et al. (2019) are proved correct when searches reveal limited examples of those who provide expressions of their practice as democratic educators. For example, **O’Brien (2006) described that within the pedagogy of her education courses, she was able to apply a range of democratic practices.** This approach allowed her teacher education students to experience democratic education in action. Her pedagogy allowed her preservice educators to learn about democracy by developing democratic habits they can use in the classroom. Harell (2020) in her preservice teacher education courses used experiential learning to help teachers explore critical thinking and disagreement in a democratic way. By analyzing disagreements, teachers experience how to navigate uncomfortable conversations in a way that models democratic decision-making, thus allowing them to learn and practice a model they can apply to their pedagogy.

Studies like these articulated the leap that democratic educators made from their theoretical framework into the concrete realm of practice, but even with this work we still lack a holistic vision of democratic pedagogy and practice (Collins et al., 2019). While literature reviews exist, covering various conceptions of democracy in the context of education including civics (Johnson et al., 2020; Lee, 2015) and citizenship (Gaudelli & Heilman, 2009; Silva & Menezes, 2016), what we are addressing here is a theoretical approach to education.

This theory addresses schools' **responsibility for sustaining democratic systems in a way that not only teaches civics but also develops the types of social and moral constructs that make a community function.**

A review that provides a vision of how educators construct a broad range of democratic education practice that goes beyond teaching how the government functions could add to the conversation. In this integrative literature review, our aim is to fill this gap as we express a collective understanding of the practice of democratic education. We analyzed a range of literature to address the following research questions: As a democratic educator, what is the connection between theory and practice? What unifying characteristics do these democratic educational practices exhibit?

Methods

We performed an integrative literature review that was designed to reveal an understanding of what practice may connect to democratic ideologies (Broome, 1993). The methodology consisted of five steps: (1) developing a guiding question; (2) searching the literature; (3) collecting data; (4) performing a critical analysis; and (5) providing a discussion of the results (Souza et al., 2010). Within each methodology (see Table 1), methods typical of qualitative research critical analysis were used. This combination of integrative and qualitative methodologies serves to increase the rigor of the method (Whittemore & KnafI, 2005).

Table 1. *Methods Summary*

	Inquiry Methods	Artistic Methods	Oral Methods	Student-Centered Methods
Definition	Methods used to seek out and investigate information in order to find truth or build knowledge	Methods using arts as the core avenue for investigation, expression, or assessment	Methods using the spoken word as an avenue for investigation, expression, or assessment	Methods focusing on placing students at the center of decision making and creating outcomes
Examples	Research Problem-based learning Project-based learning Service learning Inquiry Investigation Observation Problem solving Questioning Brainstorming Field trips	Art Drama Role play Dance Drawing Graphic arts Media production Literature Stories Poetry	Conversation Dialogue Debates Discourse Interviews Presentations Talking circle Reading aloud	Class meetings Collaborative Choice Ownership Authentic problems Experiential Active

Searching the Literature

To identify the literature for this review, we developed a structured search strategy. Our search began with databases to identify a range of articles. The primary database targeted was ERIC, provided through our library's EBSCO subscription. ERIC is the foundational database in the discipline and provides access to a wide range of educational literature. ERIC also has a thesaurus, which we used to identify a range of terminology that we applied to the search strategy. In addition, we also included SCOPUS, provided through **our library's Elsevier subscription. This database provided a different perspective than ERIC by including**

disciplines such as psychology and sociology. Also, by searching both EBSCO and Elsevier products we were able to target a different range of publishers, as these companies provide different access.

ERIC and SCOPUS were the only two databases consulted, which we understand limited our research pool. Given that we wanted to explore work on a very specific theoretical framework, though, we expected to already have a very limited pool of literature. Even with this limitation, we determined that this approach was sufficient. Since we only wanted material on educational practice, the potential that other disciplinary **databases (e.g., American Psychological Association’s APA PsycInfo or Social Science Collection) would provide relevant articles was slim; any cross-disciplinary research for our purposes would be appropriately captured by Scopus.**

We determined that other multi-disciplinary databases (e.g., Academic Search Ultimate or Web of Science) were less likely to provide us with relevant information, as they are less connected to the discipline of education, specifically, or social sciences in general. We also felt that searching additional education databases (e.g., Education Full Text, Teacher Reference Center, or Professional Development Collection) would only prove to duplicate research that had been provided in ERIC.

A researcher on our team, with a background in library science, guided reflections on this matter. We believe that targeting ERIC and SCOPUS provided sufficient coverage of the issues under consideration.

To search the databases, foundational terms were identified using the ERIC Thesaurus. Researcher-generated search terms were then added. The search terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND/OR), a **truncation symbol (*) to capture word endings, and appropriate nests were applied (“-”) to capture phrases in a way that would strengthen the search strategy (see Appendix).**

We determined that to find representations of the named theory we would only search for resources that used the exact phrase “democratic education” and some direct permutations. To capture articles that directly discussed classroom practice, we used a range of terms, such as “theory-practice relationship,” “evidence-based practice,” and “teaching methods.” These terms were taken directly from the ERIC Thesaurus. Additionally, we added other groups of terms to limit and focus our search. We decided to limit our results to the realm of “elementary education.” Given that practice changes significantly based on context, and our backgrounds are in elementary, we felt it was necessary to frame our work in that context. Also, choosing the public schooling context is the most germane to the theory we are targeting. We also decided to limit our search to the United States, given that democratic applications vary between countries. Also, since the grounding of the democratic theory we are using speaks to American democracy, this was an appropriate limitation.

Our initial search in ERIC provided 124 academic journals, and in SCOPUS, 60 results were returned, so there was a total result set of 184. Because we were targeting the very specific context of democratic education, this low result set was expected. We then anticipated the need to reduce the number of articles further knowing that our final set would be a small but representative set of articles that addressed K–6 classroom practice. We reviewed each of the articles and applied some additional selection criteria. We only selected articles representing work in the United States in elementary schools. We also selected articles that spoke directly of in-service teacher classroom practices in a way that delineated the exact method or process used in a classroom. After this review, 48 articles remained and were included in the analysis.

When we confirmed our expectation that article results would be inherently low, we also explored the potential of identifying book chapters. A researcher was already aware of one title, so we were interested to see if there were others. To start our exploration, we consulted the local university library catalog, as well as WorldCat (provided by OCLC), which represents an extensive catalog of books from around the world.

Library of Congress Subject headings obtained from the known title were used in this search, which utilized two subject strings. We first used the very specific subject term string: “Democracy Study and Teaching United States Case Studies.” To ensure that we identified as many titles as possible, we also searched the more limited term string: “Democracy Study and Teaching.” With these searches, five books were identified. After reviewing and applying the criteria as outlined for articles, three books were selected for inclusion in the data set.

From the three books selected, 33 chapters were reviewed for analysis. We acknowledge that including book chapters in this type of review is atypical; however, since book chapters provide an analogous reporting context to journal articles—even though they are distributed through a different publishing mechanism—they prove to be good sources that are often overlooked in these kinds of reviews.

By not limiting the review to just one publishing format, we felt that book sources could provide an interesting counterpoint and depth to the research. This addition brought the total number of artifacts analyzed for the study to 81.

Collecting Data

We read each of the articles and chapters to collect data. Words or phrases expressing a pedagogy, method, or activity were extracted and put into a spreadsheet. For example, we extracted expressions such as “literature circle,” “research,” and “brainstorming.” We also extracted words that expressed an object, tool, or technology used in implementing pedagogy. In this category, expressions such as “journal,” “news article,” and “poll” were identified. Lastly, we extracted words that expressed the context of how the pedagogy was implemented. Here words such as “small group,” “pair,” and “interactive” were collected. We believe that these three areas of linguistic expression captured a range of methods, activities, and assessments that teachers can use as core aspects of their democratic pedagogy.

Critical Analysis

After collecting all the data, we began analyzing it by first organizing similar ideas together. Using the sorting capabilities of the spreadsheet software, we did an initial alphabetical sort, which collected all the same words together. From this initial collection, we began looking for additional patterns to gather all the data into similarly connected groups (Saldaña, 2021). We synthesized the data by comparing ideas and then sorting words and phrases into categories that conceptually went together. This physical review of the data uncovered the similarities that were not expressed in exact text string correspondences that would not be recognized by the spreadsheet sort. Throughout the process, we revisited and refined our connections through discussion and negotiation until we arrived at four final major areas—*inquiry methods*, *artistic methods*, *oral methods*, and *student-centered methods*—that we felt expressed the structural similarities of practices that represent one vision of how democratic education is actualized.

Results

In the analysis of the data, we identified four major areas that represent overarching categories of methods that were used by those who identified themselves as democratic educators—*inquiry methods*, *artistic methods*, *oral methods*, and *student-centered methods*. We acknowledge that each of the four identified areas can and will be used within a range of educational philosophical applications.

Our purpose was not to find methods that were uniquely democratic but only to discover what practices may be associated with democratic philosophies. In the context of this inquiry, it was also important to note that these areas, while not unique to this context alone, do have unique characteristics that make specific connections to democracy. We will discuss each area individually by outlining how the methods were

represented in the literature and articulating how they connect to democracy. A summary of these methods with a definition and example is provided in Table 1.

Inquiry Methods

The first group of methods revealed in our analysis were those that involved inquiry. Each of these methods involved actions that surrounded the discovery of information and then processes that used that information to create new knowledge or to solve a problem. The term “inquiry” was often used to express this process, **applying a label that was in and of itself a method. For example, Heid et al. (2009) referred to Dewey’s** conception of inquiry-based learning and described an inquiry cycle that they used to ground their lesson. **This cycle moved the instruction “in a clockwise direction from perception to conception to expression, to reflection and finally to revision” (Heid et al., 2009, p. 11).** The researchers ended by noting that, for them, **“inquiry-based learning may be an important way to celebrate what makes our communities great, the concept of democracy” (Heid et al., 2009, p. 19).**

In addition, other methods that have “process of inquiry” at their core were also identified. Among these methods were descriptions of project- and problem-based learning. Both approaches use a range of inquiry-based approaches with the intent to solve or comment on authentic problems. Smith (1999) describes how he and others used authentic project-based learning. In one application, he describes a sixth-grade classroom rocked by an abduction and murder in their community, which prompted a student project to produce brochures on safety measures for people their age. The project was so well-developed that local leadership reproduced and disseminated their work throughout the community. This project included a range of inquiry skills such as creativity, empathy, collaboration, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication.

Another important and often mentioned inquiry method was “research.” Research papers are a traditional method for inquiry-based learning; however, the methods described go much deeper than just gathering information and rewriting it. Research processes started with a complex or essential question that was then explored using a range of information sources. Sources included a range of literature such as nonfiction and primary sources and other sources like media, film, documentaries, and newspapers. Additionally, methods through which students gathered their data, such as interviews and polls, were also included. One example of research inquiry comes from Hughes and Thomson (2016) who taught their students about environmental activism by researching the events that led to the establishment of Earth Day in 1970. In this case, students used nonfiction books and primary sources to explore the issue.

Considering how these inquiry methods were applied revealed two important aspects. First, asking questions spurred the students into this mode of discovery. Teachers often asked core questions that provided the basis for exploration. Kahn and Hartman (2018) note that children often ask fascinating and engaging questions that are messy and have moral consequences. These questions are the kinds that children need to ask to practice building their inquiry skills. Second, all the inquiry processes involved deep probing. The intent of the inquiry described was not just to cover an issue but to interrogate and investigate an idea thoroughly. **This kind of deep inquiry proved to obtain and sustain students’ interest because the questions often addressed** real-world issues, especially those that were of import to the students. For example, Schultz (2007) described how his students engaged in a deep inquiry designed to advocate to the school board for the replacement of their dilapidated and dangerous buildings. The students were genuinely committed to the project because of its relevance, and they were able to learn a variety of content and skills because of that engagement.

The inquiry methods, we discovered, can certainly be used as core pedagogy for other active or constructivist paradigms. In this context, however, we find that these methods add unique insight to this review, as this method directly connects to the skills that students will need in future democratic participation (Bauml et al., 2023; Kahn & Hartman, 2018).

Dewey's (1916) conception of democratic education embraces inquiry. He believed that processes of inquiry are important because they give students agency for their learning by allowing them to come to an understanding of concepts by themselves. Building on this philosophy, Canuto (2022) also articulated the core role inquiry plays in helping children develop the dispositions and skills that are necessary to create a vibrant democracy. This is because inquiry allows students to think critically through contexts that they both agree and disagree with, which provides them with experiences they need to be deliberative in their thinking so they can confront prejudices and draw their conclusions allowing them to make key decisions that are required for democratic participation like voting. Thus, deep inquiry is essential in democratic decision-making and civic participation.

By engaging in authentic, real-world learning experiences, students can directly practice the skills required for informed citizenship. With such a direct connection to democracy, it is easy to see why inquiry methods would be chosen by democratic educators.

Artistic Methods

Our analysis showed that many democratic educators used the arts as a key method in their pedagogy and in our sample of articles all major art forms were represented, including visual arts, dance, drama, music, and literature. Heid et al. (2009), for example, described a lesson where they had students both draw and dance to discover the aspects of various types of lines. Aitken et al. (2007) had students use improvisation to act out the story of the three little pigs to learn decision-making skills. Ngai and Kooehn (2011) used the music and lyrics of peace songs as a way for students to engage with the culture and language of the Salish (indigenous peoples of the American and Canadian Pacific Northwest) with the support of a Salish mentor. St. Amour (2003) describes how reading and writing poetry helped students explore the principle of fairness.

Because children are naturally attuned to the arts (St. Amour, 2003), many of the teachers indicated that **these methods connected directly to their student's developmental needs**. They also noted that there were other significant benefits to using the arts. For example, with their project, Aitken et al. (2007) found that children were challenged to grow socially with shy children becoming braver and quiet children acting more assertively. The experience also changed the expectations of the teachers as they learned how to hand over creative power to the children so that they could enhance their commitment to the activity in a way that deepened their learning.

For teachers, the outcomes of using the arts were significant, so much so that many of the educators not only used the arts to teach but also used them as a form of assessment. St. Amour (2003), for example, describes how the students illustrated their poetry, which was then displayed in the school. In fact, the performances or demonstrations that are the outcome of work in the arts were considered, by some, to be an exacting way of assessing student learning. Heid et al. (2009) provided an evocative description in their description of a **lesson where a child danced to create various kinds of lines. They noted that in the process "she found that her movement and her expression were as important as her words or answers to the test"** (Heid et al., 2009, p. 2).

It is not surprising to see these methods as a core part of a democratic philosophy because the arts have long been connected to democratic ideals. Historically, we can name many instances of artists engaging in a political agenda through their art. For example, Picasso's *Guernica* has long been viewed as a statement against fascism and armed conflict. Art allows us to discuss political agendas, making it a tool through which we can discuss and explore the boundaries and challenges of a democratic government (Kallen, 1944).

Democratic educational theorists have also articulated another connection. John Dewey (1934/1980), for example, saw engagement in the public sphere of democracy as mediated through participation in artistic experiences. He believed that art engages in a moral purpose as it conveys messages that cause people to reflect on their lives so they can engage purposefully in their communities. **Dewey's work tells us that art enables people to engage with democratic possibilities that can then lead to building a better future.**

Greene (1995) also makes connections between democratic ideals and art. Greene supports Dewey, as she also articulates that democracy requires more than just basic civic engagement. Democracy requires people to engage socially. For Greene, the kind of social imagination that is needed to build democracy comes from the arts. In her work, she explored ways that visual art, music, and literature extend our experiences, allowing us to be open to other perspectives that foster the kinds of empathy that are required in a democracy. With this connection to democracy, artistic methods are core pedagogy that can be foundational in this theoretical orientation.

Oral Methods

Throughout the data, it was clear that a core communication method used by educators was the spoken word. Many of the articles referred to processes involving discussion, discourse, and dialogue. These oral methods were inexorably interwoven throughout the range of other methods used, and they were often connected to engagement in the inquiry methods. As students worked on asking and answering questions, not only did they read and write, but the act of dialogue was integral to the inquiry processes.

Pessegueiro (1999) noted that speaking helped students discuss issues and ideas deeply. In oral dialogues, students and teachers recognized an essential pathway to help mold their understanding of the types of discourses that build a democracy. In addition to supporting learning, it was also clear that additional outcomes were connected to oral discourse. Pessegueiro (1999) also saw oral methods as an important avenue for building teamwork orientations and interpersonal skills. As the students listened to each other and then built on the ideas of others, they learned about trust and responsibility. For students to communicate effectively, they had to know when and how to speak up to share their personal opinions, observations, and **feelings. Since expressing one's stance within a structure of collaborative communication is important to the success of a team, students need the practice and benefit of applying important communication skills.**

Since spoken word is integral to the inquiry methods, we also saw oral interviews used to gather data to support inquiry processes. Instead of just gathering data from studies, news, or statistical sources, students often actively gathered their information through interviews. Setoguchi (1999) described a project where the students were required to gather information from an expert. Students had to first seek out an expert they could interview on their chosen topic. They then contacted the expert and arranged for an interview. As part of this process, the class built a range of professional communication skills. Students worked on finding ways to sound professional by communicating politely and accurately. Students also spent time planning and preparing for their interviews. In the end, some students used the telephone to conduct interviews while others met experts in person with tape recorders. The data gathered in these interviews was then incorporated **into the students' final projects.**

Another oral approach often mentioned was debate. McGuire et al. (2019) used a direct application of this method, for example, as they simulated a presidential election in their classroom by allowing students to create their own political campaigns. The process began with vigorous classroom discussions in which students researched issues and established their platforms. The culmination of these discussions was a student debate on their issues. All the students were engaged as different members of each campaign. Throughout the process, students were very engaged and, as the debates drew near, they worked with great urgency to prepare. The final debate session was successful, allowing students to study and explore solutions to common problems.

As with the arts methods, oral methods were also often used for assessment. In many of the artifacts, students were given a choice of the form in which they would provide a summative assessment. This choice often resulted in a range of oral presentations. After selecting a topic and doing deep inquiry, Setoguchi (1999) required students to present the outcomes of their inquiry to the whole class. To do this, students used a range of modes: Some gave lectures or more formal presentations; others did oral demonstrations; and still others

made and showed videos. All these forms provided a sound way for the students to express their learning and for the teacher to assess that learning. One of the most unique oral assessments used was described by Smith (1999). In this application, a second-grade class decided that they wanted to express their learning by doing a radio show. They worked on the show during their language arts lessons. At the end of the week, they delivered a complete 30-minute show to the local radio station. Each Saturday morning the show was broadcast, giving the opportunity for the whole community to tune in.

As with the other methods, even though oral methods are used extensively in many education practices, they also provide a strong connection to democracy. Free speech and the open exchange of ideas is a core component of democracy. Democracy thrives when its citizens engage in government, and this engagement requires the ability to communicate both in written and oral forms.

Learning to speak clearly so that what *and how* you give your point is effective and engaging—a key skill for democratic communication. Dewey (1916) saw speaking as having a clear connection to democratic schooling, as he expressed that it should be the role of teachers to begin the discussion, but then allow students to collaborate on the outcomes. As students conduct discussions and dialogue together in their classrooms, they are learning the key skills necessary for them to be civically engaged. Learning collaboration skills helps students understand how to speak up and listen as others speak.

Collaborative conversations make a democracy function. For example, public debate has been—and continues to be—a core tool for democracy. Debates allow people to express their opinions and expectations, while also allowing for the open and transparent transfer of information. From formal political debates to open dialogue about the issues in meetings (like school boards) or discussing issues in small family groups, there are many ways that students will use the oral skills they develop as part of their democratic participation.

Student-Centered Methods

Data revealed that the last set of methods—the student-centered methods—is more of an overarching philosophical approach that binds and permeates all practice. The theme of student-centeredness was so pervasive, however, that we feel it warrants particular attention. The need for all methods and pedagogy to be directly connected to students was apparent in nearly all the artifacts analyzed. It was clear that, in their practice, democratic teachers saw that it was essential for students to take direct responsibility for their learning. This practice reveals itself to be much more than just allowing students a choice or providing them with ways to have minor input into their learning environments. In democratic classrooms, teachers and students stand as equals, working as partners to establish classroom environments and develop and execute curriculum.

In the democratic classrooms described in the articles, teachers often reported that they wanted students to be an integral part of building classroom cultures. Several teachers discussed the need to build processes that allow for shared decision-making and collective responsibility for shaping the classroom. This includes sharing responsibilities for discipline and engagement (Heid et al., 2009; Trupp, 1999). One of the most common methods mentioned was class meetings, which were student-directed and often held first thing in the morning. The purpose of the meeting was for the class to discuss important things and to plan for the day. The meetings provided students a chance to share significant parts of their lives. Having this time permitted the students to establish significant bonds of friendship (Paul, 1998). The meetings also allowed the students to bring up difficulties that they encountered in the classroom. This time gave students space to learn how to problem solve as they handled their own conflicts. This shared responsibility often resolved issues early on before they became bigger problems, and it also helped students build a strong interconnected classroom community (Ford & Neville, 2006; Waskow, 1998).

In addition to classroom governance, it was clear that student-centeredness also extended to the curriculum. In these conditions, students are an active part of not only deciding how they learned but also what they

learned. This type of student-driven development becomes important to note when we look back to the core inquiry methods of problem- or project-based learning. Having students direct their own learning is a key component of these methods, so much so that many contend that without student-directed learning, these methods should not be considered authentic.

Self-directed learning addresses authentic problems with outcomes that are directed to authentic solutions. Centering these approaches on student needs and interests is the most direct way to determine what is authentic. For example, one article discussed how a fifth-grade teacher approached the standard that students learn U.S. history through the 20th century. Eschewing textbooks, worksheets, and lectures, the teacher divided the students into groups—one for each decade. Each group was tasked with learning what was important about their decade and describing what it would have been like to live in that time. Students brainstormed areas they should explore and developed a rubric by which they would be assessed. The teacher noted that the areas of study developed by the students were far more extensive than those provided in the curriculum guide. Also, the students were much more engaged in their learning as they dove in to answer their own questions (Waskow, 1998).

These kinds of student-designed approaches were often connected to important community and social issues. For example, another article described how students got engaged when they were denied the opportunity to visit a museum with exhibits related to their study because it was a 30-minute bus ride from their school. To solve the problem, the students became active participants in creating and articulating their desires. When their letter to the administration expressing their argument about why a bus should be provided was dismissed, the students felt disrespected and were spurred into further action. The students divided themselves into committees and explored ways to move forward. The students took ownership of the problem and looked at many solutions until they found a way to get to the museum. The teacher observed that the students were fully capable of articulating their own issues and concerns and taking a personal stake in their own education (Haas, 1999).

These student-centered approaches are also connected uniquely to the construct of democratic education. In his social learning theory, Dewey (1977) articulates a student-centered approach that was directly influenced by his beliefs about the role of schooling in a democracy. His approach viewed classrooms as social spaces where students work together as a community to construct their knowledge, based on their direct experience. Since taking a personal stake in outcomes is also a key component of democratic participation, this focus on student decision-making offers a clear connection to democratic theory.

Democracy is also primarily concerned with making sure that citizens have an opportunity to be involved, especially in decisions that impact their lives. The types of student-centered orientations provide the perfect models for students to learn the kinds of critical thinking, problem-solving, and societal engagement skills necessary to be active citizens. Additionally, participating in our democracy is one of the main drivers for societal change. By allowing our students opportunities to engage in authentically relevant activities, we provide a foundation for them to become the people who will be the changemakers of tomorrow.

Discussion and Conclusion

This integrative literature review provides one view of how we bridge the theory-to-practice divide (Dogan et al., 2020; Northcote, 2010). Looking for educators who embraced the theory of democratic education, we searched the literature to expose ways that their practice connected to their paradigm. We found four method categories that illustrate ways teachers transfer democratic knowledge into classroom activities, including inquiry, artistic, oral, and student-centeredness. Each of these methods is likely to be applied to a range of philosophical approaches, so what we found provides a view of education that is not connected only to the

democratic paradigm. The analysis shows, however, that teachers with democratic orientations are also attuned to these methods.

Each of these methods also provides a clear connection to the types of skills that children will need to be full participants in a democratic society. Inquiry is essential in democratic decision-making and civic participation (Canuto, 2022; Dewey, 1916). The social imagination needed to build democracy comes from the arts (Dewey, 1934/1980; Greene, 1995). Oral discussion and debate provide for the open exchange of ideas, which is a core component of democracy (Dewey, 1916). Student-centered approaches provide a foundation for children to learn the skills that will help them develop into the changemakers of tomorrow (Dewey, 1977). When these methods are used, schools provide a key environment for children to learn to participate as democratic citizens.

In articulating this understanding, we can show that certain methods applied in the classroom connect educational practice to democratic systems. We further provide additional insight into how democratic educators express their democratic values in their classroom practice. This integrative view adds to the knowledge and offers constructs, which democratic educators can use to express how their beliefs and practices are connected.

This review only provides one foundational voice that adds to an already complex conversation. There is still much we need to understand about the theory-to-practice connections of democratic educators. Further inquiry is needed to understand how teachers develop their identities as democratic educators, and how this development influences approaches to practice. Additionally, further research that observes and assesses actual classroom practice and how it impacts students would further illuminate the issue. This discussion of the unifying characteristics of democratic educational practices and pedagogies serves only to add to a longstanding conversation that will continue to progress for many years to come.

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Appendix

“Democracy” or “democratic educat*” OR “education in a democracy” OR “educational democracy” OR “education in a democracy”

AND

“Elementary School Curriculum” OR “Elementary School Students” OR “Grade 1” OR “Grade 2” OR “Grade 3” OR “Grade 4” OR “Grade 5” OR “Grade 6” OR “Elementary School Teachers” OR “Elementary Education” OR “Elementary Schools”

AND

“Theory Practice Relationship” “Grade 5” OR “Grade 6” OR “Elementary School Teachers” OR “Elementary Education” “Evidence Based Practice” OR “Teaching Methods” OR “Educational Practices” OR “Educational Methods” OR “Classroom Techniques” OR “Curriculum Implementation” OR “Developmentally Appropriate Practices” OR “Integrated Activities” OR “Learning Activities” OR “School Activities” OR “Teaching Models” OR “practice*” OR “application*” OR “method*”

NOT

“Foreign Countries” OR “foreign”



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