The Universal Goals of a Democratic Classroom

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Abstract: The field of social studies education is rooted in citizenship education. With this in mind, social studies teachers should implement to the best of their capabilities a "democratic classroom" as an incubator and laboratory in which students can learn about, practice, and build values as democratic citizens. To do this, teachers should work with students to design and operate within democratic classroom structures, encourage discussion and deliberation, foster self-trust and mutuality, and engage in critical analysis.

Introduction

Classroom teachers across all disciplines are likely familiar with "why" questions: Why do I have to do so much homework? Why do I have to participate in this group project? Why do I have to learn about this topic? These questions from students can be frustrating in their frequency but should not be dismissed as useless complaining. Every teacher and every discipline should be able to confidently answer these "why" questions. Students, parents, and the larger community deserve educational choices that can be justified and defended. In a social studies classroom, the answer to these "why" questions is rooted in the preparation of citizens to manage the demands of democratic society. To do this, social studies teachers must organize their classrooms to teach students not only what democracy is, but also how to participate in democratic life.

What Is Democracy?

Before defining a democratic classroom, it is necessary to establish a definition of democracy. John Dewey proposes a definition that is broader than the context in which this term is most commonly used. For Dewey, democracy extends beyond a "method of conducting government, making laws, and carrying on governmental administration by means of popular suffrage and elected officers," to "something broader and deeper than that," (Dewey et al., 1987, p. 457). In his foundational work, Democracy and Education, Dewey (1916) describes democracy as a "form of social life in which interests are mutually interpenetrating, and where progress, or readjustment, is an important consideration," (p. 100). In democratic societies, members' individual well-being is bound up with the interests of their fellow members. Dewey (1916) says a democratic society "makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms [and] secures flexible readjustment of its institutions," (p. 115). Thus, a function democracy requires a certain level of flexibility to allow for change as the interests of the society change. Dewey (1916) sees democracy as a social orientation toward mutual interest, community participation, and "the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder," (p. 115). This inclusion of social change in this definition centers advocacy for social justice as a component of democratic citizenship.

In her 2010 study of democratic practices in Swedish classrooms, Melissa Vinterek divides democracy into three categories: object, skills and stance (p. 369). The democratic object is what democracy "is", including the theoretical concept and formal institutions of democracy. The democratic object is something one can learn "about". Democratic skills are the actions involved in carrying out democracy. These would include participating in elections and community meetings, processing and assessing information, and navigating legal structures, among other skills. One learns how to "do" democratic skills. In contrast, the democracy "stance", according to Vinterek (2010) is "neither a skill, ability nor pure knowledge about the concept. It encompasses a person's attitudes and ways of considering things based on democratic values and as such moral/ethical knowledge," (p. 369). The democracy stance is neither knowing nor doing, but rather a way of being. All three of these subcategories are essential to democracy.

What is a Democratic Classroom?

Education that teaches young people "about democracy," how to "do democracy," and how to "be democratic" people is essential to the functioning of democratic society. According to Sahin and Kılıç (2021), civic education is uniquely essential in democracies because while, "every governmental system aims to raise individuals who will keep themselves alive, societies governed by democracy should also raise individuals who will maintain democracy through democratic education because democratic citizens are the guarantee of democratic order," (p. 182). Therefore, democratic education produces democratic citizens who are capable and willing to continue the work of democratic life. In line with Dewey's definition of democracy as flexible enough to allow for social change, Geneva Gay (1997) defines democratic education as a source of change that involves "more than merely transmitting past experiences, heritages, and contributions to students" (p. 5) Democratic education aims to move beyond this goal to teach students how "prevent past violations of democratic principles, such as racial discriminations and oppressions, from reoccurring in the future," (Gay, 1997, p. 5). Democratic education is concerned not only with the world as it is but also with the world as it could be.

What do Teachers and Students do in a Democratic Classroom?

Having defined a democratic classroom theoretically, it is important to also describe what a democratic classroom is in practice. The following are four essential components of democratic classrooms. In democratic classrooms teachers and students: operate within democratic structures, foster self-trust and mutuality, discuss and deliberate, and engage in critical analysis.

Teachers and Students Operate within Democratic Structures

In the first week of a U.S. Government class students and teachers sit down together to decide upon basic classroom expectations and roles. Students have an opportunity to weigh in on how and when late work is accepted. They discuss the pros and cons of personal cell phone use. A series of small group discussions feed into a full-

class exercise in which students and the teacher build consensus on a list of ten core expectations for all members of the classroom community. Through this activity, teachers and students are operating within democratic structures.

A classroom, like any society, is governed by both formal and informal rules, expectations, and norms. A democratic classroom should be governed by formal and informal rules, expectations, and norms that reflect its democratic aspirations. Sahin and Kılıç (2021) says that a school should be considered a "micro-society," (p. 183) a classroom being a miniature version of society in its entirety. Students and teachers are individuals within this micro-society with different but interdependent and equally significant roles. If this micro-society is to be democratic, the hierarchy between teacher and student should be de-emphasized in favor of applying the "principles and rules of democracy" (p. 183) in classroom decision-making processes. Hess and McAvoy (2015), like Sahin and Kılıç (2021), describe democratic classrooms as democratic not only in their curriculum but in their actual structures. This approach to classroom design and management is student-centered. Hess (2015) says, "when teachers engage students in discussions about what rules ought to be adopted by a class, they are teaching them to think politically," (p. 4). When students help decide on rules for things like late work, group participation, and acceptable or unacceptable behavior, they are engaging with the core democratic question, "How should we live together?" Sahin and Kılıç (2021) explains further that, "People who have a voice in the state administration correspond to students who have a voice in the classroom" (p. 183). In other words, when students are responsible for helping to organize the classroom "micro-society" they are more likely to take ownership of the administration of communities outside of the classroom.

Teachers and Students Foster both Self-trust and Mutuality

Democratic societies are in a constant state of balancing the good of the individual and with that of their community. In a democratic classroom teachers and students must devote attention to both the individual and the community.

A sophomore student is taking a World Geography class as an elective. After learning about the causes and effects of local water access issues, a unit project requires her to design a poster advocating for a solution and to present the poster to her peers. The student is nervous to present her project but feels more confident knowing that the teacher and students in this class have all agreed to standards of respect while presenting. After she presents, the teacher gives affirming and constructive feedback that takes the student's voice seriously. Students who choose to do so are even given the opportunity to share their advocacy poster with the local city council. In a self-assessment, the student says she feels proud of having expressed her perspective on an issue that affects her and her community.

If students are expected to be active participants in a democratic classroom community, they must also be able to envision themselves as capable of democratic participation. Students will not "do" democracy unless they believe they can. Students must have what Swedish scholar Tina Ekman calls "political self-esteem" (as quoted in Vinterek, 2010, p. 370) in order to participate in democratic life. Vinterek (2010) explains that "active citizenship presupposes a trust in the ability of oneself" (p. 370). Teachers can help students cultivate political self-esteem by creating an

"atmosphere of tolerance and respect" and cultivating in students a "willingness and the ability to express one's thoughts as well as a willingness to listen to others" (Vinterek, 2010, p. 371). In a democratic classroom, students are given opportunities to express their opinions and perspectives. As a teacher, it is essential to give students safe opportunities to develop and express their civic voice.

In a sociology classroom, students give and receive feedback not only on their individual performance, but also on their contributions to the good of the group. Students are rewarded for sharing their experience and perspectives with the group, for providing opportunities for their peers to learn from their experience, and for bringing challenging questions to the group for consideration. Through cooperative learning and group projects, students understand that their ability to succeed is contingent on their peers' engagement in learning and vice versa.

Democracy requires individuals to not only see themselves as civic actors but also to see themselves as interdependent members of a larger civic community. Geneva Gay (1997), in her study on the relationship between democratic and multicultural education, asserts that traditionally educational settings put too much emphasis on "individualism and competition," neglecting to cultivate "societies of intimates in which collective identities, shared responsibilities, and interrelated destinies among ethnically, racially, socially, and culturally diverse individuals and groups are normalized, honored, and advocated" (p. 5). Gay advocates for centering community and connection as core classroom values. Ultimately, scholarship on this question would point to the fact that both sides of this coin (individual contributions and community collaboration) need to be valued and cultivated to create what Vinterek calls a culture of democracy in the classroom.

Teachers and Students Discuss and Deliberate

In an economics class students are learning about the federal student loan system. Individual students are assigned to research different aspects of this topic. With all categories represented, students gather in small groups to share their newly-developed area of expertise. Once all individuals have shared their findings with the group, students are given a simple question: What, if anything, should be done to address the growing burden of student debt on young people in the United States? As a group, students must decide and present on an answer to this question. Once each group has presented, the class will deliberate collectively and ultimately vote on the best answer.

Classroom discussion is a very commonly used learning activity in K-12 classrooms. It is a useful and productive exercise in many ways and an important tool in a democratic classroom. However, discussion alone is not sufficient for a democratic classroom. In his book, Teaching Democracy, Walter Parker (2003) draws a distinction between the broad concept of classroom discussion and the more specific practice of deliberation. Parker (2003) says discussion is a "kind of shared inquiry, the desired outcomes of which rely on the expression and consideration of diverse views" (p. 129). The goal of discussion is to engage with ideas that are still "in progress" and work toward a shared understanding. Deliberation is a variety of discussion with the more specific goal of "deciding on a plan of action that will resolve a shared problem" (Parker 2003, p. 129). The general goal of discussion is to clarify,

to deepen, to broaden understanding. Deliberation has a more tangible outcome. As Hess and McAvoy (2015) explain, the central question in a deliberation is usually some version of "What should we do about this?" (p. 5). The intent of deliberation is to arrive at a mutually agreed upon solution or plan of action regarding a question of interest to the community. "Much like John Dewey's view of 'democracy as a way of life' deliberative theorists argue that when the public discusses policy, knowledge is expanded, self-interest is diminished, and the result is a policy that a community or polity can legitimately expect members to follow" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 5).

Deliberation is an essential part of the final step in Sahin and Kılıç's (2021) 3-part learning model for democratic classrooms. Sahin and Kılıç calls this deliberative process "shura," an Arabic word that translates literally to "consultation." In shura, students are expected to take the cumulative results of the first two learning steps – individual contributions and small-group discussion – and as a larger community deliberate on what the outcomes of the learning process mean to answer the question, "What should we do about it?"

Teachers and Students Engage in Critical Analysis

Students in an introduction to psychology class are expected to learn many of the major players in the initial development of the field of psychology, a list most often primarily populated by white men. As a central part of this unit, students are asked to explore ways in which individual identities of researchers might result in blind spots or biases that impact or skew the results of psychological studies. Students do research on famous examples of scientific racism and share what they have found with their peers. In this unit, students learn the history of the field they are studying while consistently asking questions and applying a critical lens on sources of inequity with an aim to avoid similar outcomes in the future.

Embedded in the definition of democratic education is the practice of constant critique and reassessment of established ways of doing and being. Geneva Gay (1997) says that democratic educators should take an "emancipatory approach [and emphasize] teaching critical, liberatory. and transformative knowledge [instead of] adaptive and conformative ones" (p. 7). This means classroom practices and curriculum address issues like "power, privilege, perspective, hegemony, personal consciousness, and social action at multiple levels (local, regional, national), and in varied domains of human activities (social, cultural, moral, environmental, political, economic." (Gay, 1997, p.7). Gay argues that oppressive and hegemonic practices like those often imposed upon marginalized minorities by the European American majority in the United States are "violations of the letter and spirit of democracy" (Gay, 1997, p. 5). Therefore, a democratic classroom should necessarily encounter and seek to dismantle these kinds of oppressive power structures.

Conclusion

Students who learn democratically, live democratically. As social studies educators who are invested the continuous transformation of society to suit people's constantly changing needs, it is essential to design classrooms where students experience democratic life and form democratic identities. This can be achieved when teachers

and students operate within democratic structures, foster self-trust and mutuality, deliberate on issues, and engage in critical analysis. Armed with these skills, students leave the classroom prepared to take on the complex challenges of contemporary democracy.

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Margaret Dziubek received a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies from DePaul University in 2013. Subsequent experience as a cultural exchange administrator led to a passion for working in diverse educational settings. Margaret earned a Master of Education (Adolescent/Young Adult, Social Studies) from the University of Toledo in 2022.